橘公司

The author
Koushi Tachibana

15

六喰ファミリー

デート・ア・ライブ

DATE A LIVE

ファンタジア文庫

Date A Live - Volume 15 - Mukuro Family

「美味しくなあれ。萌え萌えきゅん」

CONTENTS

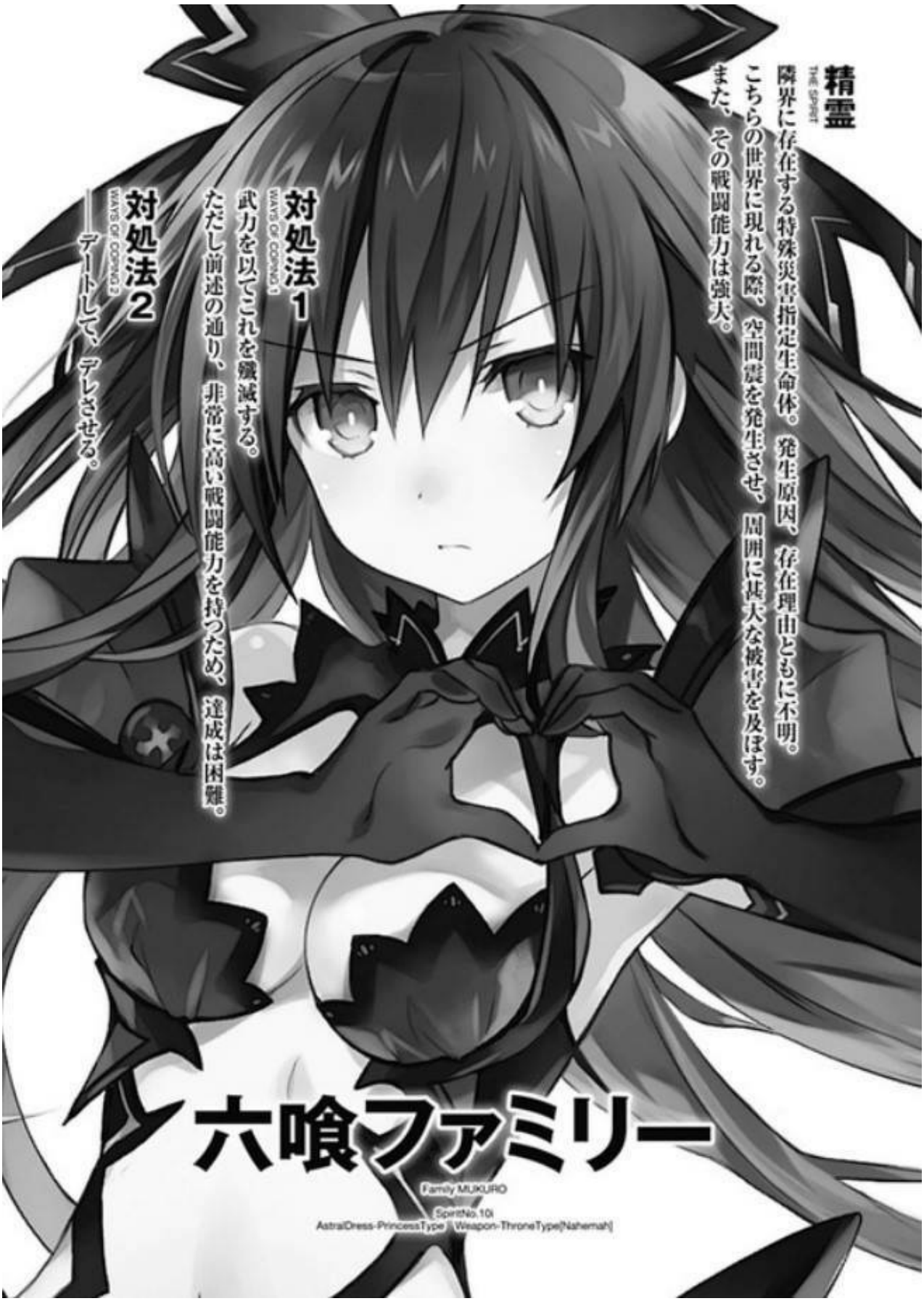
第六章　バトル・オブ・コスモス…… 004
第七章　開かれた心 …… 076
第八章　閉じられた記憶 …… 154
第九章　忘却の外から …… 210
第一〇章　鍵と剣 …… 268
終　章　再会の時 …… 321

あとがき …… 333

Contents

- Illustrations
- Chapter 6 - Battle of Cosmos
- Chapter 7 - The Unlocked Heart
- Chapter 8 - The Locked Memories
- Chapter 9 - Oblivion of the Outside
- Chapter 10: The Key and the Sword
- Epilogue: Reunion Time
- Afterword
- Notes
- Credits

Family MUKURO
SpiritNo.10i
AstralDress-PrincessType Weapon-ThroneType[Nahemah]
OPEN
Welcome Back
Maid cafe
橘公司
The author
Koushi Tachibana
15
六喰ファミリー
DATE A LIVE
デート・ア・ライブ
ファンタジア文庫


精霊
隣界に存在する特殊災害指定生命体。発生原因、存在理由ともに不明。
こちらの世界に現れる際、空間震を発生させ、周囲に甚大な被害を及ぼす。
また、その戦闘能力は強大。
対処法1
WAYS OF COPING 1
武力を以てこれを殲滅する。
ただし前述の通り、非常に高い戦闘能力を持つため、達成は困難。
対処法2
WAYS OF COPING 2
デートして、デレさせる。
六喰ファミリー
Family MUKURO
SpiritNo.10i
AstralDress-PrincessType Weapon-ThroneType[Nahemah]

DATE A LIVE Family MUKURO

デート・ア・ライブ 15 六喰ファミリー

『――いくぞ、六喰。
おまえの心を開いてやる」
高校生――五河士道
「不遜なり。身の程を知るがよい」
精霊――星宮六喰

「士道の回復が
第一なんだからそこは
忘れないでよね」
〈ラタトスク〉司令官――五河琴里
「シドー！
大丈夫か!?」
精霊――夜刀神十香
「私がちゃぁーんと、
私スポンジで洗ってあげますからねぇー」
精霊――美九
「負傷した状態では
身体を洗うのも大変なはず。任せて」
精霊――鳶一折紙
「大丈夫だって！」

「まったく粗野な女じゃ。どれ主様、むくが手を貸してやるのじゃ」
「……、ええと」
「あーん、だ。口を開けろ。開けなければ代わりに頬に風穴を開けるぞ」

Chapter 6 - Battle of Cosmos

The distant realm, engulfed within the celestial light of countless stars, threatened to immerse every speck of negligence. The otherworldly view made one ponder if they had already been transported into their own dreamlike fantasies. Sinking into the night, it was as if Heaven and Earth had their positions reversed.

Yet, this description was not necessarily untrue. After all, Itsuka Shidou was at an astronomical zenith higher than the skies, a place which held the planet Earth under the viewer's eyes: the vast cosmos.

Everyone knew about space. Everyone was aware of the void. However, not many can say that they have trespassed on the domain of the gods.

Naturally, the diverse species on Earth could not survive here.

Not only did the absence of essential oxygen prevent biological processes from occurring, but the cosmic rays, which were normally blocked by the atmosphere, would cause detrimental effects on any living organisms. Unlike a fantastical landscape, this was a desolate world devoid of any life.

Despite these unfavorable odds, Shidou, without the assistance of a spacesuit or anything to preserve his lifeline, floated to the center of attention.

Although that may be so, it was a matter of course. Shidou did not enter the cosmos for mere sightseeing or swimming. He was there to unlock the sealed heart of the lonely girl who had fell into an eternal slumber within that barren, empty space.

"——Mukuro."

Shidou calmly called out that name.

Mukuro, Hoshimiya Mukuro. He whispered that miserable Spirit's name. A young girl, with flowing golden hair that was longer than her frame and a fluttering constellation-themed dress that entwined with her slim stature, gently drifted in front of Shidou. Emotion did not, or had ceased to, exist on her innocent face. Her gorgeous pair of golden eyes still viewed everything in the world without a hint of interest.

“———————Hm.”

Mukuro lightly exhaled a breath and spoke.

“Thou art pestilence at its core, and poor remembrance to add.”[1]

“Yeah, I’m a simpleton who doesn't give up and accept other people’s intentions.”

Shidou raised the corners of his mouth as he declared, while Mukuro merely sighed again. However, she could not find it in herself to harbor any disgust towards him.

Of course, that did not imply that the opposite was true. To be precise, Mukuro displayed absolutely no sort of emotion towards Shidou, be it malice or kindness. This unexpressive act merely deferred to her innate sense towards eliminating intruders in her territory. The abnormal mood stirred up the word puppet within Shidou’s mind.

“……”

Nonetheless, that was understandable. Shidou shot a glance at the key- shaped staff held in the palm of her hand. It was the angel <Michael>, which possessed the ability to seal the functions of any object its tip stabbed into with a single turn of its bow.

According to Mukuro, she had utilized that power on herself, locking the window to her own heart. Exactly what personality resulted from that and how it affected Mukuro’s mind was unclear. Yet from that outcome, be it joy, anger, sadness, or pleasure, Mukuro possessed none of those sentiments.

And yet she, who had forfeited everything to drift in that location far from the surface, was interfered and unobserved by anyone, leading solely a wanderer’s purpose.

That’s why Shidou arrived once more after being rejected before.

“Be it so, what bids thee to return, though the present thee flickers not?”

Mukuro tilted her head and questioned. It was most likely due to her bored expression that the act of slanting her head seemed like a taunting provocation.

“That’s a given—I came to talk with you again, Mukuro.”

“What nonsense. The past reiterates: being drawn to thy hypocrisy shall confound Muku. Muku hath not sought salvation—”

“That’s wrong.”

Shidou interrupted Mukuro’s words in a stern voice. He firmly stared into her eyes and continued.

“I didn't come to talk to the current you. I came to talk to the previous you, the real Hoshimiya Mukuro whose heart isn't locked by <Michael>.”

“…Huh?”

Mukuro gave a snort of disapproval without the slightest change of expression.

“Fie. Dost thou disbelieve Muku’s selfhood? Muku hath time and again quoth herself, yet thou hark not. With what standing dost thou remark against Muku?”

“True, you’ve said it before. But why did you lock your heart? I haven't really got a clear answer from you for this one question.”

As if with intense satisfaction, Shidou tightly gripped his fists. Mukuro’s words suddenly appeared within Shidou’s head.

“Perjury lay not upon me. Ask thou why? Dispensable forfeiture, nay, and aspects of misfortune I say. I know not what I used to anymore.”

In their previous conversation, Mukuro had indeed stated that she sealed her own heart of her own volition. However, when she had been asked for the reason, she gave an ambiguous answer. Either she had been deliberately deceiving Shidou, or she truly could not recall with much certainty. Her true intentions as to why she had made such a drastic decision must not be that simple.

“…Ah, that’s right. Why didn't I notice it earlier?”

Accompanied by a sigh, Shidou verbalized that sentence. It wasn’t for Mukuro, but for himself. He directed that doubt to his former self who had been at a loss when Mukuro’s rejection struck his weakness. It was laughable, for him—Itsuka Shidou to not perceive that until the moment he spoke.

“I’ll ask you one more time, Mukuro. Why you are in a place like this, and why did you seal your heart? What in the universe have you gone through?”

“……”

Mukuro put on a cheerless face, her mouth shut. After a few seconds had passed, she let out a breath.

“——Fine, forthwith.”

Shortly afterwards, as if her ears deafened towards Shidou’s question, Mukuro turned <Michael> in her hands and pointed its tip in his direction.

“Whether to heed mine admonishments or otherwise is thy leisure. Likewise, however Muku revies is her discretion.”[2]

As she made her declaration known, the floating rocks and mechanical debris surrounding Mukuro bombarded Shidou in a devastating blitz as if under her visual influence.

“——Ugh!”

The sudden assault forced Shidou to hold his breath, though it wasn't as if he was mentally unprepared. In actuality, Mukuro had also assailed him without prior warning during their last dialogue. If Shidou had not been conversing with her through a three-dimensional projection of himself, he would have undoubtedly died quite a few times.

However, being prepared had nothing to do with being able to react properly.

The incoming barrage resembled a volley of darts at most. Even so, when fused with a Spirit’s power, the onslaught could match the destruction of a miniature meteor shower. The fragments of rubble charged with bone- breaking, flesh-tearing might as it soared towards the determined Shidou.

“Kuh——”

Shidou defended using both his hands, making sure to protect his head by pulling his body back. Since he possessed Kotori’s healing flames within his body, unless he was killed in an instant, there was a chance for Shidou to recover completely.

However.

“——Eh?!”

Having expected to be mercilessly lacerated to death, the guarded Shidou abruptly exclaimed in a fit of disbelief as something contrary to his anticipations happened.

His reaction was comprehensible. After all, not even a single one of the numerous projectiles which Mukuro had launched hit Shidou. Every one of them had flown past him.

Of course, his lucky break wasn't due to Mukuro misadjusting the trajectory. It

was as if Shidou's body could sense the projectiles' paths and just avoided them, similar to how buoyant objects floating on a liquid fan out with wavy ripples on the surface.

"This is…"

A familiar voice resounded from the receiver worn on Shidou's ear.

"——I won't let you take out my Onii-chan that easily."

Their identity was obvious. It was the voice of Shidou's sister, a commanding officer of Ratatoskr, Itsuka Kotori. She was the reason why Shidou was able to survive in outer space with only his normal clothes on. Kotori and the gigantic airship which she commanded, <Fraxinus EX>, were present there as well. As for the warship, it was currently utilizing the coverage of its Territory to shield Shidou's body, allowing the sound of his voice to propagate through the vacuum of space and reach Mukuro's ears.

"It follows the same principles as <Fraxinus'> automated evasion ability. The deployed Territory can detect any approaching entities and prevent them from coming into contact with Shidou's body."

"I see… Thanks for that, Kotori."

As Shidou showed his gratitude, a voice other than Kotori's reached his ears.

『Only to Kotori?』

"Haha… You too, Maria."

『As long as you are aware. However, please refrain from excessively relying on this ability. Compared to the Territory surrounding the structure of <Fraxinus>, Spirit powered bullets or not, those are simply inferior projectiles.

The Territory can still handle flying scraps, but it will not sustain the attack of an angel. In addition—』

Kotori abruptly cut off Maria's elaboration.

"Un. Sorry, but don't count on us to assist you in carrying over your voice forever. We've got our own guest to deal with here."

"…Okay, I understand."

Guest, the mere mention of that very word provoked a complete reversal in

Shidou's mood as he looked back. The cause was relatively simple. A number of warship silhouettes could be seen appearing from the Earth in pursuit of <Fraxinus>. Without a doubt, those were the airships belonging to DEM Industries.

As Shidou was on the verge of making a move, four warship vessels which had attacked <Fraxinus> appeared in space and fiercely pushed on without any signs of stopping. And positioned at the center was the fated-to-be- enemies-with spaceship <Goetia>. Even for the revamped <Fraxinus>, simultaneously looking after Shidou and dealing with the spawned enemies would prove to be an extremely arduous task. Shidou steeled his resolve, nodded his head, and faced Mukuro once again.

"The Territory is more than enough. —Leave this to me."

He silently whispered a phrase and extended his right hand at a slow pace.

The other party was a Spirit who held tremendous power, not to mention one whom Shidou's words have had no effect on due to her unwavering heart.

However, Shidou had not travelled great lengths while completely lacking a viable countermeasure. Indeed, he knew of but one method to break the lock securing Mukuro's soul.

"……"

Shidou regulated his breathing, concentrated his vigor, sharpened his mind, and brought his convictions to fruition. With the hope of rescuing Mukuro as his guide, a figure gradually began to form within blurry rays of light.

He called out the name of that figure, the name of the angel that possessed incomparable strength.

——The name that could smash the abhorrent status quo, the sole key.

"<Haniel>."

In an instant, following a blood-boiling sensation coursing through his body, an undulating radiance suffused the palm of Shidou's right hand where a long weapon manifested there. Be that as it may, its length differed from those of rifles and swords. Looking at its rigid form and blunted end, rather than some weapon or staff, the item resembled a simple broom.

"……Ho?"

Mukuro responded to the angel <Haniel>, which suddenly appeared out of

nowhere.

“An angel, eh? Thou bear nary semblance to a Spirit.”

But she narrowed her eyes as if she immediately understood why.

“Me seems that aught hath me wit. That be the told sealing of spirit power by thou. Hm, maugre the wherefores draw breath in darkness, thou must have wrest many an angel from the hands of my kin, eke thy woos to Muku erewhile.”

“Don’t make me sound like a criminal—I admit it, this isn’t my own power. But the thought of capturing an angel has never even crossed my mind. I just want to save you from these powers that should have never been given to you.”

“Know thou not of repentance? ’Tis unfeasible, there exists not an angel capable of surpassing Muku’s <Michael>.”

“Is that so? Well, then—”

Shidou loosened the corners of his mouth and poured all his energy to <Haniel>’s handle as he shouted.

“<Haniel>——<Kaleidoscope>!”

In a split second, as if working in concert with his succinct recitation, <Haniel> emitted a faintly pale glow and fabricated a contemporary outward appearance. After a few seconds had come and gone, the resplendent <Haniel> transformed into something completely unalike its previous form.

——It had changed into a key-shaped staff. <Haniel> had flawlessly morphed into the same <Michael> currently gripped in Mukuro’s hand.

Mukuro’s heart had been sealed by Mukuro herself through <Michael>’s power. In other words, in order to unlock her heart, only she herself could do so. Thus, the only entity able to undo the present plight using this absolute rule was, without a doubt, <Haniel>.

“…What betoken thou?”

Her anticipations were exceeded. Mukuro called out with astonishment.

“Eerie forsooth, to think that thou hast the effrontery to mimic <Michael>.”

“That’s how it is. After all—”

Shidou simultaneously pointed one end of <Michael> at Mukuro.

“I’ll be able to talk with the real you this way.”

“Presumptuous loggerhead, give allowance for Muku to edify thee of thy place. To whatever extent thy façade feigns fidelity, dost thou verily ween that thou art free to reign over <Michael> with savoir faire?”

“Who knows, we’ll just have to test it out a bit.”

Shidou declared while calmly regaining the lost composure. With his abruptly beating heart, he was wielding <Michael> with both hands soon afterwards.

“—Here I come, Mukuro. I’ll definitely unseal your heart and save you.”

◇◇◇

From the loudspeakers installed inside the bridge of the refurbished <Fraxinus>, Shidou’s fully determined voice reverberated throughout the room. Sitting on the commander’s chair, Kotori nodded her head, slightly rocking her hair, which was neatly tied into twin tails with her black-colored ribbons.

“I’ll leave it to you then, Shidou.”

After concisely saying so with steadfast willpower, Kotori tightly closed her eyes.

For Shidou, Hoshimiya Mukuro was a Spirit whose danger level could be compared with Tokisaki Kurumi and inverse Spirits. Although the Territory did serve some purpose in protecting him, sending Shidou out by himself to deal with her was an onerous decision, even for Kotori to accept.

However, the enemy currently pursuing Fraxinus was humanity’s strongest wizard, Ellen Mira Mathers, and the high speed warship which she commanded, <Goetia>, the ship which had once shot down <Fraxinus> in the past.

“All personnel prepare for battle stations! We’re up against the world’s most troublesome enemy! Stir up your mood!”

“Roger!”

The staff spread out in the bridge replied Kotori with nervous looks. Kotori motioned in confirmation and turned back her head. Behind her, there stood eight girls who didn't seem to suit the bridge fittingly. They were all Spirits whose powers had been sealed by Shidou up till now. Every one of them anxiously watched the image of Shidou displayed on the main monitor.

“Kotori!”

“Kotori.”

Between the two who simultaneously vociferated—one was a young girl who possessed characteristic dark hair that was the color of night and had clear crystalline pupils, while the other remained the only Spirit to remain composed in those dire circumstances—they were Tohka and Origami respectively.

Even Kotori could easily guess what they were about to say. After a moment of wavering irresolution, she earnestly sighed from the depths of her throat.

“…I guess you two have already made up your minds. Well, I never planned on having either of you getting involved in this fight at first, but now…”

Kotori faintly turned and exhaled once again. The organization under her command, <Ratatoskr>, was one which held safeguarding every Spirit as its utmost purpose and priority. The act of sending Spirits whose powers had been painstakingly sealed into the battlefield indeed conflicted with the corporation’s advocated intentions.

Nevertheless, everyone knew within their minds that it was not the time to emphasize on ancillary morals. Moreover, an unfaltering flame relentlessly kindled in their eyes, inextinguishable by anything Kotori could say.

“Fine. Could I ask for your help—”

Tohka and Origami nodded in sync before Kotori could even utter the length of a full stop.

No, there was more to that. All the other Spirits put forth their strengths and expressed their approval as well.

“I want… to help!”

“Heh, heh, with the power of us Yamai, even a hurricane can blow across the vacuum of space.”

“Agreement. We are unable to sit idle in this situation.”

“Exactly, exactly! My lovely Darling is out there fighting, I can’t just stay here!”

“…If Yoshino’s going, I’m going too.”

“Un! That’s right, a final boss battle where everyone joins forces! Ah, but my Spirit power is down now, so I guess I’ll be supporting you guys from the ship.

Sorry!”

As Yoshino, Kaguya, Yuzuru, Miku, Natsumi, and Nia respectively said so, Kotori put on a helpless expression.

“I get it. I’ll be borrowing everyone’s powers then.”

The Spirits raised their fists and shouted a war cry altogether. Their vitality- filled voices vigorously reverberated throughout the bridge, sending shudders all over Kotori’s body as if she was being yelled at loudly.

As if influenced by the Spirits’ boost in morale, the strain that previously painted the crew’s faces vanished in an instant and was replaced by alleviating encouragement. With refreshed determination and zeal, they bestirred themselves again. The Spirits’ voices appeared to relax the mentalities of the crew who were about to confront the most formidable enemy in history.

However—the surrounding lively ambience did not last for long.

The reason became apparent on the main display monitor as countless hordes of miniature machines were seen being deployed from DEM’s armada, swarming towards Shidou and Mukuro. Those devilish dark grey contraptions of humanoid figures were DEM Industries’ unmanned weaponry, the Bandersnatch units.

“Che…! Those bastards—”

“C-Commander! I’m detecting signals from something other than the Bandersnatch units!”

<Deep Love> Minowa suddenly interrupted Kotori’s cursing.

Of course, that could not be helped. After all, on the main screen something, completely unalike the Bandersnatch units, was moving within the vague shadows created by the innumerable machines.

To be precise, it was someone.

That person was a young girl who had blonde hair and was wearing a light blue

and white colored Combat Realizer Unit.

“That’s…!”

“—Artemisia Bell Ashcroft.”

Origami uttered the girl’s name as her eyes stared intently at the screen.

Although her tone was quite calm and monotonous, a keyed up expression gradually formed on her face as her hands clasped tightly.

For Origami, this was a rarely seen response, though well vindicated.

Ultimately, Artemisia was a Wizard with power second only to Ellen Mathers.

She must be prevented from intercepting Shidou at all costs. Kotori began to speak in a plainly anxious voice.

“Kuh—Proceed with the drop-off according to their location. Tohka and Origami, you two will go first. Get on the teleporter quickly.”

“Un!”

“Understood.”

After replying so, Tohka and Origami hastily moved towards the teleporter unit installed inside the bridge. As Kotori watched the two with a half-glance, she issued an order to Fraxinus’ AI, Maria.

“Also, Maria, prepare AW-111.”

『Roger, but it is still in maintenance. Is that fine? 』

“Yeah, Origami will make good use of it.”

“……?”

Origami acutely inclined her head since she was unaware of Kotori’s implications. Afterwards, a compartment was extracted from under the central automation console, wherein a branded silver object was slowly revealed.

Kotori seized the item in her hands and placed it before Origami. The girl could only fix her dazzled eyes onto the mysterious object as she received it.

“This is… emergency gear?”

“Correct. That’s a CR-Unit manufactured by Asgard Electronics, called <Brynhildr>. It’s our newest model, so it’d be great if you could exploit the equipment.”

Kotori explained so while giving a thumb up. As if she had immediately assembled the pieces of the puzzle together, Origami powerfully gripped the gear she held and lightly nodded her head.

“—I understand.”

“All right, and then let’s get going. Confirm the coordinates and begin the teleportation!”

『Roger, starting the teleporter. 』

Maria’s reply to Kotori was transmitted through the loudspeakers. Soon after that, the bodies of Tohka and the others, who were standing on the teleporter installation, began to emit a thin, pale luminesce.

Just at the moment they disappeared.

“Yaaa……!?”

Fraxinus’ bridge suddenly quaked from a severe, unknown force, eliciting a yelp from Kotori. The commander was staggered by the unexpected assault, almost capsizing on her seat itself, as she barely managed to stabilize herself.

Be that as it may, Kotori and the crew members, who somehow contrived to stay seated, could be considered as rather fortunate since the adjacent Spirits had all lost their equilibrium and gracelessly toppled onto the floor.

“Kyaa…!”

“O-o-ouch… what happened…”

Nia gently rubbed her forehead, which had been knocked against the solid floor, while pouting her mouth with resent of the accident. To her chagrin, the one who then replied was one of the crew members situated in the lower section of the bridge.

“<Goetia> launched an explosive incendiary!”

“Our Territory has successfully neutralized the bombardment, no damage was sustained!”

The report caused the infuriated Kotori to furrow her eyebrows with rage.

"…Che."

If <Goetia> had utilized ordinary magic-powered artillery shells, their might would have been effortlessly nullified by the Territory, and the effect of the blast would not have reached the bridge. Ellen was aware that Fraxinus'

Territory was nigh impenetrable; thus, she borrowed another Territory for the purpose of that attack.

It resembled the knocking of a door.

"Are you belittling us, Ellen Mathers…?!"

Kotori fiercely gnawed at the lollipop in her mouth with her teeth.

As if in response to Kotori's rhetorical statement, the speakers inside the bridge began to sound a warning siren which signaled an incoming transmission from outside the ship. Without even having to guess who the sender was, Kotori commanded in a dolorous manner.

"…Put it through."

"Roger!"

Accompanying the crew's affirmation, after some miscellaneous electrical noise scurried through the display screen, the image of a young woman was shown on the now clear monitor.

She was a beautiful blonde female of Northern European origin with skin as pale as that of an ill patient. She was magnificently accoutered in a platinum circuitry which clearly upheld her status as a Wizard. If one were to judge from her outward appearance, her neck and wrists seemed thin enough to be snapped off by a minor amount of force.

At first glance, she would look like a normal—rather, a fragile foreign girl from anyone's perspective. Nevertheless, her blue eyes were imbued with absolute self-confidence in her strength.

"…Ellen Mathers."

"Indeed. It has truly been a lengthy while since our last conversation, Itsuka Kotori."

Ellen responded with a mocking smirk. Her leisurely mien induced a quiver or two from the tips of Kotori's brows.

This spectacle was not the first of its kind. When Shidou previously borrowed <Zafkiel>'s abilities in order to rewrite history, Kotori and Fraxinus had come face to face with Ellen in a similar manner—merely to be defeated in the end.

"You look like you haven't been taught a lesson and emerged once more. But things won't be going your way anymore."

"Humph, is that warship the origin of your overconfidence? A new variety, I presume, however—it's useless. I'll shoot it down again no matter how many times it will take."

"How dare you—"

At that moment, Kotori held her breath.

It was then that it had occurred to her—the significance of Ellen saying again.

Fraxinus had suffered a loss against <Goetia> during Shidou's endeavor in the previous world. The Ellen of this world was not supposed to know even a sliver of the ordeal.

"…I see, so it was <Beelzebub>'s doing."

Kotori faintly whispered.

The omniscient Demon King <Beelzebub> that Isaac Westcott had snatched away. It was no mystery that they were able to acquire unobtainable-by- normal-means information of the world before it had been altered.

"Hmm… Your boss is really fussy, like a kid who just got a new toy."

"A kid, huh… What you said may not necessarily be untrue."

"Ho? Even a manga wouldn't have something like this. If that guy had so much as the least amount of judgement, he wouldn't have personally come to the enemy's base, more so as the ringleader."

"…Huh?"

In the instant those words reached Ellen's ears, for the first time, her face stirred into a grimacing caricature.

"What did you just say, Itsuka Kotori? Ike went to Ratatoskr's base in person without me?!"

Along with shocking astonishment—or rather, ireful indignation—such pronouncements vociferated out of her throat.

“＿＿＿＿”

This unpredicted reaction rendered Kotori flabbergasted and speechless as she gulped her saliva down with a cluck. She absolutely could not have misheard despite the awkwardness of Ellen’s speech—she had no idea about Isaac Westcott raiding Ratatoskr’s base.

“…Hm? Judging by your reply, you seem to be completely unaware of this matter. Not informing you about a fight that important, even though the both of you are on intimate terms. He doesn't have much trust in you, does he?

How quite unforeseen…”

“……”

Ellen became uncommunicative and was reticently lost in silence for a little while, breathing down Kotori’s neck with an expression like never before.

All in all, after slightly moving her lips as if she was thinking aloud, Ellen returned to her former relaxed disposition and tidied her long bangs.

“What a blatant taunt. Would I, of all people, believe in the enemy’s words?”

“You can confirm it yourself if you aren't convinced. Or perhaps, are you scared?”

“What you’ve spouted are all nonsensical lies, anyway. All right, if you insist, I shall go and verify the matter myself.”

As she declared so, Ellen put on an incisive, sharp demeanor and resumed.

“—Five minutes will be enough.”

The connection was severed simultaneously. The DEM warships, which appeared on the refreshed main display screen again, showed a variety of changes.

As they were keenly focused on <Goetia>, being the center of attention, the other three ships had secretly encircled <Fraxinus> before they had the chance to even notice. The flames of war stood on the verge of breaking out.

After a high-pitched groan, Kotori shouted her orders to the crew members.

“Set the attribute of the Territory to defense and fall back! Being surrounded will

be hard to deal with, though, other than <Goetia>, they're all small fries.

Before that happens—"

"Kotori-san!"

Kotori's words were abruptly interrupted by a voice from behind—it was Miku's.

"Please teleport us outside the ship! Let us take care of the small fries!"

Following her example, the other Spirits voiced their opinions as well.

"Kotori-san can take on Goetia…!"

"Kaka, Tohka and Origami have departed to Shidou's location. We ought to follow suit."

"You guys…"

Although hesitating at first, Kotori gave light nod.

"—Well, I'll leave it to you to obediently stay here."

"How did it come to that!? We can help with our powers too!"

"Calm down. It's precisely because of your powers that I'm counting on you to remain in the ship as a last resort."

"Eh…?"

"Doubt. What does that imply?"

Kotori's statement made the Spirits rack their brains in a dumbfounded expression.

"Actually, even I'm fed up with doing nothing. But since it's <Goetia> that we're facing off against here, maybe—"

As she shifted her field of vision towards the Spirits, Kotori suddenly ceased her talking. The reason was very simple—one Spirit was missing.

"Eh…? Where's…?"

"<Goetia> is approaching!!"

However, just then, a crew member's voice was transmitted from the lower bridge

section, instantly pulling back Kotori's consciousness. There was no time for any careful consideration. Even if she had hidden herself away due to fear of battle, Kotori could not blame her for that purpose. More importantly, she did not plan on coercing her to provide any assistance. With a salute, Kotori issued instructions to the crew.

"Everyone wait for the perfect opportunity to strike! All personnel make preparations! We will be commencing soon!"

"Roger!"

The crew members' firm affirmations reverberated throughout the bridge.

Kotori licked her lips and fixed her gaze on the platinum aerial warship that was displayed on the main monitor.

"Here I come, destined archenemy. I'll let you enrich your intelligence regarding the brand-new Fraxinus' strength."

Afterwards, Kotori pointed at the screen and offered the following words.

"All right——let our battle <date> begin."

◇◇◇

"—<Unlock-Rātaibu>."

Accompanied by a fleetingly brief sound, Mukuro stabbed her key-shaped angel <Michael> into the void. As she turned, similar to a door being opened, a passageway was instantly unfurled in that space, forcefully drawing the many heaps of floating rock and rubble machinery around Mukuro.

"Evanesce."

"……!"

In a split second, multiple gates were unlocked in a way that enclosed Shidou. The projectiles, which had previously vanished, flew out from the gates simultaneously. It was an endless barrage from all directions, from all 360 degrees, leaving no blind spot unharmed. Naturally, <Fraxinus'> Territory which

was protecting Shidou responded accordingly, assisting him in avoiding the piercing barrage of bullets—yet to no avail. Unlike previously, there was absolutely no place for him to hide this time. The few inescapable missiles kept drawing near him, as if they had a merciless thirst for puncturing into Shidou's body.

However, Shidou was not naive enough to stay in place like a sitting duck. He raised his left hand towards the front and shouted.

"<Zadkiel>…!"

In a flash—frigid draughts raced around Shidou's surroundings, beginning to take the shape of a sturdy, ice shield. The incoming debris collided with the rigid chunks of frozen water, shattering into scant fragments of frost and verglas. Several shock waves remorselessly pounded Shidou's feeble frame, akin to a helpless vessel being rampaged by an unrelenting tempest at sea.

Witnessing the event, Mukuro indistinctly narrowed her eyes.

"Hm, thou art able of bidding other angels verily. All the more jaundiced. Art thou in sooth a mortal wight?"

"I've considered that possibility before. But—"

Shidou gazed into Mukuro's eyes with rapt attentiveness, taking a deep breath in the process. He then depicted an illusion within his mind and spoke.

"—For the sake of reaching you, I guess that now is not the time to be picky."

With the Army-Breaking Songstress <Gabriel>, Shidou poured all his strength into his voice. The mystical incantations which propagated from inside Shidou's throat vibrated his eardrums via Fraxinus' Territory, bestowing on him a power that greatly surpassed the limits of a normal human.

"Uooooooh!"

He curled up his legs in midair and immediately stretched them out the next instant with a forced exhalation. Naturally, there were no footholds or whatsoever in space. However, the Territory deluging Shidou's body sensed his movements and propelled him forward in a wide leap. He closed in on the floating Mukuro at a high velocity.

Yet, at the next moment—

"…Huh!?"

Shidou reflexively suppressed his breathing.

The grounds for his reaction were well justified. Just before he arrived at Mukuro's position, the shadow of a human figure draped in a suit of machinery suddenly appeared out of the corners of Shidou's eyes.

"My apologies, this Spirit belongs to us."

The blonde girl retracted her laser saber as she said so in an apathetic tone.

"You're——"

Shidou remembered who she was—Artemisia Ashcroft, one of DEM Industries' Wizards, and the girl who attacked Nia when she inverted.

It looked like she had come to the cosmos along with <Goetia>. Regardless of that fact, Shidou, who had previously amassed all of his available attention on Mukuro, was utterly unable to perceive even the tiniest sign of Artemisia's swift advance up until the actual event itself occurred.

Artemisia's sword took aim at Shidou's vulnerable neck.

The boy was done for, screwed, toast. Shidou didn't know whether or not <Camael>'s flames could heal a decapitated head. Granted that such a wondrous miracle proved to be feasible, Artemisia and Mukuro still would not patiently wait for Shidou's head to slowly reattach to his body afresh.

However, within that short-lived period of ten or so seconds, a fervid emotion which held no regard for his own personal safety prominently emerged from Shidou's heart.

That's right. If Shidou were to die there and then, Artemisia would definitely assault Mukuro without the slightest hesitation. Of course, Mukuro was a Spirit. With the presence of her <Michael>, it was possible for her to make a quick escape to a faraway region despite any contingencies. She was even powerful to the extent that she could kill Artemisia instead.

On the contrary, if the latter were to happen, it would equate to Mukuro sealing her own heart forever.

Her options would be death or eternal stagnation.

For Mukuro, Shidou's elimination merely meant that she would be left with those two remaining choices.

“Something like that… how could I ever accept it…!”

Shidou managed to control his weakened body and wield <Michael> with a forward motion. Naturally, it was too late for him to defend. Nonetheless, if Artemisia so much as relented a bit when she was carried out the deed, perhaps the beheading would not turn out to be a clean cut at all. Provided that Shidou’s head remained connected to his body by even the thinnest layer of skin, there was a chance for <Camael> to save his life.

Those were all probabilities without exception, purely imaginary reluctances.

However, they were the greatest efforts that Shidou could strive to accomplish.

The tip of Artemisia’s laser blade drew near Shidou’s throat. The razor-sharp edge of her sword formed with enormous magical power lacerated his bare flesh, incising an acute excruciation throughout his nervous system as the foul stench of scorched blood diffused across the space. —However.

“……U-Ugh!”

The one who quelled their breath was not Shidou, but Artemisia.

“Eh——?”

Hearing such an exclamation, he could not refrain from slow-wittedly exclaiming himself.

Shidou, who had thought he was dying just mere moments ago, still possessed the conscious ability to confirm the matter itself of his own accord, and his throat was able to verbalize as before. Shidou understood right away.

The saber which had grazed his neck was obstructed from underneath.

“——Shidou, are you all right?”

“Origami!?”

Shidou widened his eyes as he called out the name of the girl who had appeared before him. Origami stood there, adorned in an unfamiliar suit of machinery. Her ensemble was embellished with a streamlined pure white CR-

Unit, which was equipped with pauldrons and a breastplate resembling European armor. Her weapon, rather than a sword, looked more like an elongated spear.

“That outfit—”

“I’ll explain later.”

After Origami succinctly replied back, she swung her spear at Artemisia, who had lost her balance from the parry.

“Kuh……”

“……Ugh.”

Due to their Territories impacting each other, they could perceive the other’s energy and tenacity. Both Origami and Artemisia vaguely distorted their expressions into grimaces as a result.

Their intense magic concentrated at a single focal point, discharging blinding streaks of light throughout the pitch-black cosmos, shining on their eyes as well.

“Shidou!”

A voice reached his ears as he was just freed from the desperate impasse.

The next instant, his wrist was tightly gripped by a strength that threatened to dislocate his hand, pulling him away.

“Ugah!?”

Shidou couldn't help but yell, before realizing the significance of that action immediately afterwards.

In a flash, the space that Shidou had previously been in was thoroughly permeated by magnified rays of stinging light which emanated from Mukuro.

Supposedly, if Shidou was still blithely lost in a daze there, the life that Origami had saved would be pointlessly discarded yet again.

“Are you okay, Shidou?!”

“Ah, yeah, thanks a lot for that, Tohka.”

Shidou cast away the beaded droplets of sweat on his forehead and called out the name of the girl who had dragged him away from imminent danger.

Without a doubt, the one who rescued Shidou from that crisis was Tohka, wearing her limited Astral Dress and brandishing her angel <Sandalphon> in her hand. It looked like she had come together with Origami.

However, there was no time for respite.

Mukuro seemed to heave a sigh and simultaneously raised <Michael> once more, bombarding projectiles in their direction. It did not end there.

Innumerable humanoid figures appeared behind them—<Bandersnatch> units. The robotic machines fired artillery at Shidou and Mukuro.

“Guh… <Zadkiel>!”

“Hah!”

Shidou constructed a shield out of scratch using the angel while Tohka was fending off the Bandersnatch units’ attacks with <Sandalphon> at the same time. Naturally, this alone was not nearly enough to terminate the other party’s offensive.

Shidou, Ratatoskr, the Spirit hunters DEM, and the girl who deemed both sides as her foes, Mukuro, each for their own purpose had showered the cosmos with torrents upon plethora of spiritual and magical power.

“……Ugh!”

Yet, despite being caught up in the tumultuous maelstrom of war, Shidou harbored no dread. To be precise, another philosophy currently governed his line of thought.

“Tohka! Now’s your chance!”

“Un! I’ll clear a path!”

Tohka loudly declared so.

Both of their minds seemed to have connected for an instant as they thought up a scheme on the fly. That was to be expected. In battles, the speed and keenness of Tohka’s decision-making synchronized with Shidou’s mindset.

Indeed, Shidou and the others encompassed the exact center of the battlefield. Even with the shelter of Fraxinus’ Territory, it was a merciless combat zone where no error went unpunished. Each mistake cost direly—a ground zero brimming with overwhelming magical power.

At the same time, Mukuro found herself bemused with the state of affairs which menaced her to counteract. In fact, she was presently skirmishing anything approaching with magic rays or utilizing <Michael> to open doors that could engulf them whole.

“Let’s go, Tohka!”

“Ooh!”

After rallying with Tohka, they leaped together, throwing themselves into the brilliant streams of meteors.

In the pitch-black cosmos, two shadows entangled, collided, and drifted by each other.

Origami manipulated her own Territory and observed the balance regulator, receiving several pressing attacks from Artemisia in the process.

“Fuh—”

“Too naive!”

Origami fired a shot with her lance, but to no avail as the bullet was obstructed by Artemisia using her laser saber. The modicums of magical energy dispersed like sparking fireworks, casting light upon her eyes.

“Kuh—”

One slash after another, Artemisia began to slowly, but surely, close the distance between the two fierce combatants. Origami’s face became drenched in perspiration. Being endowed with the latest equipment did not fill the disparate gap between their abilities at all. This cruel fact made her reminisce the time when she once squared up to Ellen Mathers, albeit to have crumbled from her opponent’s godly strength.

“Heheh…”

Deeply engrossed in Origami’s facial features, Artemisia let out a soft hum.

“That combat Realizer unit of yours is rather eccentric, if I must say. Your spear can absorb any magic scattered in the surroundings and turn that power into the sharpened edge of a blade. A battle of stamina would spell the end for me.”

“……”

Origami’s eyebrows faintly quivered. Certainly, the laser-tipped spear held in her hands, <Einherjar>, possessed such an innate attribute as Artemisia had stated. For this reason, Origami could control and wield the generated magical power to coerce her adversary into a war of attrition.

“Such a CR-Unit beholds a new sight for me. Yet, you are a Wizard yourself.

For whose sake do you side with the Spirits?”

“……”

A scourging sense of affliction resided within that sentence. Artemisia was supposed to be acquainted with Origami. Unless she was an amnesiac herself, it was very difficult to imagine how she could have forgotten.

“…Artemisia. Why did you defect from the SSS and join DEM? You weren’t even the slightest bit tolerant of them.”

“……? What nonsense are you spouting? How did you even get hold of my name… not to mention what is the SSS… supposed to be…?”

Artemisia’s face blatantly displayed her misgivings. She wrinkled her brows, supporting her aching forehead with her hand.

“Agh… huh…?”

She moaned and groaned in pain, forcefully shaking her head as if to extricate herself from the terrible headache, and replaced her line of vision onto Origami.

“…Forget it. It looks like you intend to keep standing in my way of completing my mission.”

Artemisia narrowed her eyes and heaved her sword again, renewing her battle stance.

“Forgive me, but I must eliminate you.”

“…!”

In a fraction of a second, the figure of Artemisia in Origami’s view rapidly expanded, accelerating without warning. The entire phenomenon felt as if Artemisia had already taken action before Origami’s brain could even think, let alone register her movement.

It was indeed a Trompe-l’œil pounce. Luckily, the laser saber, which loomed to cleave open her forehead if left untrammeled, was just barely blocked by <Einherjar> in the nick of time. However, that mere impediment did not slow down Artemisia’s assault. Up, down, left, right, and front—the slayer’s slashes seemed to endlessly flail at Origami without any intervention. [3]

“K-Kuh…”

Fending off every strike proved to be an impossible feat for Origami. Her abdomen suffered from a direct thrust, sending her staggering backwards.

Locking blades and trading blows one after another, Origami was once again enlightened about the difference in ability between both fighters’ capabilities.

Even Origami herself possessed the self-confidence not to lose too any sort of Wizards, except that Artemisia’s level was far above that standard.

Qualities such as magic capacity, control, the scope and precision of their Territories no longer played a part in the comparison. Perhaps even the foundation of her abilities was at the utmost pinnacle of what the human body could attain. It could be said that she surpassed Origami, as a Wizard, in literally every aspect possible.

“…Ugh, however—”

Origami had a reason to win this fight.

She twisted her face dejectedly and clenched her fist.

“Artemisia Ashcroft, you’re very strong, always more than I am.”

Origami deeply inhaled and concentrated her mind.

“——As a Wizard, that is.”

After she spoke such a sentence…

“…Huh!?”

About to swing down her sword like an executioner, Artemisia broadened her eyes in utter shock—her aiming system had completely detached itself from Origami. There was nothing she could do about it. If, in the midst of war, her opponent’s body suddenly started to emit light, even Origami would be on the alert for any movements made by the opposite party.

“This is……”

Artemisia stared at Origami with dazed eyes, utterly stupefied.

Her metallic suit of armor blended with her limited Astral Dress from which a glorious radiance emanated. Exactly, the limited Astral Dresses affect the present

attire that the user wears during its conjuring. In the event of that outfit being a CR-Unit which possessed combat capabilities, such an outcome was inevitable.

Spirit and Wizard, an absolutely incompatible pair fused into a single amalgamation of harmony. A spiritualized Wizard—most likely a one-in-the- world marvel of a synthesized union that only Tobiichi Origami was capable of manifesting.

“With this, I’ll be able to face you head-on.”

After tranquilly proclaimed so, Origami’s pure white Astral Dress fluttered as she fixed her eyes on Artemisia. Following closely, Artemisia, whose eyes had widened like round marbles, issued a response.

“A Spirit? Haha… so that’s apparently the case. You were that Spirit present during my subjugation of <Sister>. Wearing your CR-Unit made me fail to recognize you.”

Artemisia curved the corners of her lips and chortled.

“All right —seeing that you are a Spirit, I can now slay you with no regrets.”

“……”

Origami and Artemisia exchanged silent glances—like two magnets of opposite poles, mutually attracting each other. The pair simultaneously scuttled into the hollow void.

◇◇◇

“Deploy <Yggdrafolium> numbers one to ten to the assigned coordinates, maximize Territory output!”

“Roger!”

In the lower section of the bridge, <Dimension Breaker> Nakatsugawa skillfully operated his panel. Shortly afterwards, the auxiliary monitor displayed an image of <Fraxinus>, showing its rear section emitting an azure glow and several automated foliage units being ejected.

Subsequently, they encircled the body of <Goetia>, each expanding its Territory to the fullest like weapons floating in space.

“All right, it’s time! Fire the High magic-powered cannon, <Mystletainn>!”

“Roger. <Mystletainn>, preparing to discharge.”

Just as the AI Maria responded to Kotori’s command, a low slightly muffled, tremor shook the bridge, and a blinding flash of light scintillated on the main monitor screen.

A devastating torrent of magical power emerged from the front end of <Fraxinus> and extended towards <Goetia> at an unbelievable speed, unable to be followed by the naked eye.

However—the enemy warship dodged to the right with an unnatural path, escaping the <Yggdrafolium> with an abrupt jerk.

“Chi… they are still making exaggerated movements as always.”

Kotori furrowed her eyebrows unrelentingly.

The greatest weapon controlled by Ellen’s warship <Goetia>. Its eminence laid neither in excessive firepower that could annihilate anything nor infinite durability able to withstand anything— but rather the locomotion flexibility which the naked eye could not keep up with.

Unlike other airships, through Ellen Mathers’ direct interposition, movements which defied the fundamental laws of physics could be achieved. <Goetia> prided itself upon this exulted specialty second to none. The current situation was like a heavy-duty motor vehicle finding itself ensnared within the palm of a giant. <Fraxinus> could do what it could to enhance its maneuverability with upgrades, but they would never hold a candle to <Goetia>’s sheer might. If they were to maintain the status quo, that is.

“——Kannazuki!”

“Present.”

At Kotori's call, the tall and thin man beside the captain's seat made a reply.

He was Fraxinus' Vice-Commander, Kannazuki Kyouhei. Equipped on his head was a peculiar device which transmitted his brain waves to a Realizer unit—an Electro-Encephalograph.

"Maria, set Fraxinus to be operated manually."

"Roger. One Realizer unit has been left over while the remaining units are serving as magic generators."

After Maria said so, Kannazuki placed his hands on the device and stirred up the corners of his mouth.

"What a pity. Although I don't remember anymore, those guys on the other side must've given us a crushing defeat in the previous world—unforgivable.

Those damned Wizards who harmed Commander's beautiful world tree, and I myself who failed to protect it."

"Don't worry about it. But I'll have you avenge that loss."

"Naturally. Ah, to be mortified and humiliated unbeknownst to oneself, doesn't that turn you on like being forced to do stuff subconsciously?"

『Kotori, I implore you to reconsider handing over control of the ship to this person. 』

"I understand your doubts, but try to bear with it."

Kotori heaved a sigh as she answered to Maria's anxious misgivings towards Kannazuki's words. However, the person himself did not mind—rather, it would not be inaccurate to say that he assimilated a pleasant delight from Maria's reservations.

"Anyway, go ahead. Let me examine what differentiates now from before."

"Roger, as the Commander wishes."

As Kannazuki respectfully bowed and responded, <Goetia> swiftly approached as if in concert.

At the same time, Kannazuki narrowed his eyes into a sardonic gaze and deployed the final <Yggdrafolium> from the rear end of the vessel in order to cut off <Goetia>'s advancement.

Ordinary warships were incapable of evading that attack at such a speed and distance, unless their defenses were aided by Territories. Of course, if they were an ordinary ship.

Just before it came into contact with the boundaries of the <Yggdrafolium>

Territories, <Goetia> instantly changed course. To be precise, it maintained the parallelism from the confines to itself, going through the strait crevices in between the dense <Yggdrafolium> and gradually drawing nearer and nearer.

“<Goetia> is still approaching!”

The crew’s voices reverberated throughout the bridge. <Fraxinus> was driven into a corner. Any ship would be unable to dodge a direct enemy attack from such a close distance. However, Fraxinus was not just any ship.

“———Hm.”

The moment <Fraxinus>’ and <Goetia>’s Territories collided, Kotori felt an unfamiliar floating sensation.

Simultaneously, the monitor connected to Fraxinus’ front surveillance camera displayed a change which occurred at a frightening rate.

“Uaah!?”

Someone’s loud shout filled the room.

In the twinkling of an eye, <Goetia’s> hull was reflected from Fraxinus’ previous position. Fraxinus was the same as <Goetia> in that it did not move analogously with the aid of a propeller.

That subtle floating sensation was for the sake of safeguarding the bridge against that reckless influence and the aftereffect evolving from exerting the Territory. If the force from a daredevil stunt like shifting an enormous airship in a split second had not been mitigated, the bridge would have undoubtedly been filled to the brim with the afflicted crew members’ blood and vomit.

“Uah! What was that! The screen distorted and…!”

Kaguya excitedly yelled from behind. Kotori held up the lollipop formerly contained in her mouth and raised the corners of her mouth.

“This is a new feature <Fraxinus> gained after the overhaul. By establishing another Territory within the airships, the reactions between them allow for

previously unaccomplished freedom in movement.”

As she shrugged her shoulders, Kotori boasted as a sliver of pride escaped her eyes.

“Well, don't mind me. I'm just pissed off about not getting the chance to get back at <Goetia> until now for what they did in the previous world. ”

As if produced merely for the sake of replying to Kotori, Maria’s voice resounded from the loudspeakers.

『No problem, Kotori, Realizers and spaceships can be manufactured by anyone. However——』

After a momentary pause, Maria resumed.

『—only those which win are authentic goods.” 』

Monotonous, electronic sound without rises or falls in intonation. All that could be surmised regarding her expression had been reduced to a single word displayed on the main monitor: MARIA. Despite her robotic voice, anyone who heard it would undoubtedly imagine a young girl smirking with mischief out of the blue.

Kotori loosened her countenance, looking straight at <Goetia.>

“That's right, Maria. —then let us make known to them, whom are provoking who.”

“Roger!”

Headed by Kannazuki, the crew members responded at the same time. Yet one person wrinkled her eyebrows in discomforting abashment. It was Nia.

“Uh, but Imouto-chan, is that really okay? I'll admit that it’s a bit cool, but that was just imitating the opposition and not completely overtaking them.”

Indeed, her words held meaning. Kotori turned to Nia, deciding to proceed with answering her. Nonetheless, Maria beat her to it.

『What is the matter with this person? Does she think that spouting a couple of complaints would make her seem wise? 』

“No, no, no, I didn't mean it that way…”

『Foul-natured customers with bad temperaments, if those claimers were to breed,

their children would address them as Monster Parents. That would be a threat to society, so please stop.”』

“Ugh, why does it feel like this brat is being so stubborn with only me?”

Nia unconvincingly furrowed her brows as she stated so. Kotori could not help but shrug her shoulders.

“We can only rely on the pieces at hand now to make a move. Let's deal with <Goetia> first.”

Kotori then pointed her lollipop directly at the image of <Goetia> shown on the display monitor.

◇◇◇

“……Huh.”

Within the bridge of the high speed mobile airship <Goetia>, Ellen Mira Mathers composedly sighed.

No, perhaps the word bridge gave off a rather ambiguous impression.

Precisely at the center of an area where various electronic devices and mechanical units were being deployed, Ellen sat on the space command module seat, with numerous bundles of wires connected to the complex circuitry embedded in her attire.

Yet that was the truth. In fact, the ship <Goetia>’s particular methods of operation were entirely unlike any commonplace, run-of-the-mill aircraft. It could be appraised as Ellen’s special-purpose, gigantic, tactical Realizer unit.

“That previous movement—did it copy <Goetia>? I see it looks like the upgrade affair wasn't a mere bluff after all.”

Ellen narrowed her eyes into thin slits as she scrutinized the projection of the ships’ outside surroundings.

Ratatoskr’s space warship, <Fraxinus>, its motorized performance exceeded the reported intelligence in Ellen’s memory by far. In addition, there were other

inconveniences—the Spirits staying inside the ship.

If they were to destroy <Fraxinus> just like that, the Spirits would find themselves being dragged into the discordant clash. The conflict had already passed beyond the point of reconciliation. In the worst case scenario, the Sephira crystals could be scattered throughout the vast cosmos, never to be retrieved ever again.

As a result, it was indispensable for Ellen to retain <Fraxinus> as indefinitely powerless as its original state was. If they had let the Spirits remain inside the ship with that intention in mind, Ratatoskr would have been a dreadful force to be reckoned with.

“Well, never mind that.”

Yet Ellen did not expose an unnerved veneer.

“In a lion's presence, this is but a hare becoming a fox.”

After briefly enunciating these lines, Ellen once again propelled <Goetia>. By means of her electrical suit, the sensory system of Ellen’s body was largely broadened in scope. It was as if she had sunk into an extensive ocean of interconnected nerves fibers. The current Ellen was fully in sync with the platinum-hull airship. Identical to as pictured in her mind, the enormous warship navigated through the pitch-black emptiness of space.

An entity which surpassed the mutual symbiosis of Goetia and Ellen did not exist in this world.

“I'll correct myself. <Fraxinus>——three minutes will suffice.”

<Goetia> swept through the length and breadth of the boundless cosmos, bombarding Fraxinus with barrages of cannon shells. Fraxinus managed to riposte with considerable effort; however, as some time elapsed, the difference both sides’ reaction times dwindled, and the disparity conscientiously rose to an insurmountable crescendo once more.

“———Fuh.”

The countless stars shining in the sky traced a splendiferous trail in Ellen’s eyes, inciting a pastel sensation in the woman as if she had suddenly been placed in a colossal stream of meteors.

Despite traversing at a velocity which inspired awe and reverence in the hearts of mere mortals, Ellen’s brain could still identify the circumstances which entailed her present situation. Her consciousness turned extremely perspicacious as everything

around her seemed to become locked in the impartial passage of time while she alone transcended reality. Nobody part of this world could even begin to describe the experience of having their senses juxtaposed with Ellen.

“Generating magical power, charging duration, not to mention that obvious locomotive ability—it appears that they are indeed stronger than the <Fraxinus> of the previous world. Nevertheless, the most crucial strategy doesn't befit them. What a waste.”

As Ellen gave a snort of contempt, she closed in on <Fraxinus> with a posture threatening to unleash an explosive flood of magic greater than all that she had emitted until now combined.

“I'll commend you for being able to set foot in my Territory’s domain.”

Afterwards, the cannon’s mouth turned towards the direction of the unguarded body of the ship.

“Those who dare challenge heaven will have their wings plucked—and shall be scorched by the holy flame like that fool Icarus.” [4]

A flash of light, the brimming magic that had condensed heavily to its critical point erupted in a single disgorging flare, surging towards <Fraxinus’> direction. <Fraxinus’> Territory, which was supposed to protect them, had been remarkably weakened in intensity due to coming into contact with <Goetia>’s——a chokehold that Ellen would not let go of.

Considering the distance and opportunity, the possibility of <Fraxinus> successfully evading was next to zero.

However——

“……Huh?”

The next instant, Ellen forcibly held her breath.

The cause was simple. Just at the exact moment of impact, <Fraxinus> instantaneously shifted, and <Goetia>’s magical power missile passed without a graze.

“This is…”

Ellen widened her eyes, gazing at <Fraxinus> anew. Rather—she could only intend to do that.

But at that point in time, <Fraxinus'> figure was no longer present there. In its place was a violent shock wave heading towards Ellen.

"What… …!?"

Ellen's chair vigorously shook, nearly causing her to fall down from her seat.

"What's going on!?"

<Goetia>'s surface was enclosed with a layer of Territory. Even the force of a meteorite shower would not result in such a severe tremor.

The sole thing that could damage the spaceship was a magically powered assault. And right now, there was only one enemy ship on the battlefield.

That's right. In every place of the ship's structure entwined a certain variable substance as <Fraxinus> circled behind Goetia, beginning its counterattack while emanating a shimmer like that of a polished silver hue. At the moment that this was affirmed, the observation equipment installed in Goetia sounded an alarm.

——Reiha detected.

The magical energy observed being engendered by the warship in front was not made through a Realizer unit——but from the Spirits' energy.

"——<Fraxinus>……!"

Ellen's eyes were furiously overwhelmed with blind rage when the apparent reality sank in, her voice filled with pure, rancorous enmity.

◇◇◇

"——Who ever said that we only had one trump card?"

Kotori shifted her gaze towards the enemy ship displayed on the monitor as she wiped the cold sweat on her forehead with her sleeve. The opposition had suffered a direct hit from the magic cannon, exposing the armored interior of the high speed warship.

Presently, Kotori profoundly leaned on the captain's seat, with several electrodes

attached to all over her body and extending from the chair.

No, that wasn't the entire case. Behind her seat stood an upright cylindrical device, and the Spirits currently placed their hands on top of the piece of apparatus.

“——Great job, everyone. My spirit power alone wouldn't have been nearly enough.”

“No problem… I'm delighted that I could help.”

“Kaka! United, we are invincible!”

“Assent. Nobody is able to oppose us.”

The Spirits gladly replied to Kotori.

“At this rate, our powers are going to mix together! We'll become one! Ah, what bliss!”

…Well, among them was a girl who was overjoyed at an entirely different matter compared to what the others had in mind.

In spite of that, with everyone's cooperation, they had indeed avenged the defeat during their previous battle with <Goetia>.

——System Blót. [5]

This was Fraxinus EX’s newly picked up trump card.

Similar to the spirit-powered cannon Gungnir, its fuel was directly supplied by Spirits and allowed the Territory to obtain unimaginable power within a short amount of time.

Naturally, since a sealed Spirit would require imposing a specific backflow in their bond with Shidou if they wished to release a fixed amount of energy, Kotori would have preferred not to use the mechanism at all. Nevertheless, in usage, its output strength was unquestionably monumental.

Not to mention the amassed energies of five Spirits—Kotori, Yoshino, Kaguya, Yuzuru, and Miku—were being utilized at the moment.

The current <Fraxinus> could not be considered as a warship anymore.

To be accurate——it was a bullet which possessed determination and free will, striding across the expanses of outer space.

“How regretful, even though Ratatoskr’s Realizer unit capabilities are slightly more superior, we had to resort to foul play in the end.”

As a matter of fact, whether they had reversed the gap between both parties’ actual strengths was difficult to say.

But—

“We've won this moment. Bite the dust, world's strongest Wizard.”

Kotori erected her thumb and pointed it downwards afterwards.

As if in concert with her gesture, <Fraxinus> fired another couple of magic cannon shells, which impaled Goetia, its reactions sluggish after suffering the previous attack.

The conceited, self-proclaimed strongest platinum warship spewed out black smoke on its descent towards the Earth’s surface.

◇◇◇

“Uaaaah!”

Shidou tightly grasped <Haniel> with both hands, having transformed the broom into <Michael> as he speeded through the Territory.

Numerous Bandersnatches had already emerged around Mukuro, and the two sides became engaged in tangled warfare and skirmishes. Mukuro waved <Michael> while repelling the approaching humanoid machines by using flaring rays of light and showers of meteorites.

A golden opportunity; moreover, what was even more satirical was the fact that most of DEM’s robots were completely ignoring Shidou’s existence in the fray. Of course, the <Bandersnatch> units were not allies of Shidou and the others, nor did they agree to a temporary ceasefire. The few units to which Shidou came too close for comfort, however, did respond by launching offensives.

However.

“——Hah!”

Before the Bandersnatches’ attacks could hit their target, Tohka had leaped in front of Shidou and was already hacking away at the mechanical droids with her broadsword <Sandalphon>.

“Go, Shidou!”

“Un!”

As Shidou charged at the opening Tohka had created, he seized the chance to quickly forge ahead to Mukuro’s side with the intention of inserting the tip of the key into her body.

“<Michael>…!”

Yet, just as she touched the frame of <Michael>.

“——<Unlock -Rātaibu >.”

Mukuro’s tranquil voice pulsated, a miniature gate opened before the <Michael> that Shidou had previously extended, forcefully sucking its tip inside.

“Wha… huh!?”

“——Did thou verily believe the waxing foes would beget Muku to pretermit espying the unsavory thee?”

With an incisive look, Mukuro stared at Shidou, heaving <Michael> upwards at the same time. Conforming to this action of hers, coalescing particles of light emanated from <Michael>’s end.

“Shidou! Run for it!”

“Kuh……!”

Shidou tensely held his breath and decided to escape from there.

But——it was too late. Mukuro’s <Michael> had already emitted several beams of burning light before Shidou could even lengthen the distance between them.

“Shidou!”

“——Hm?”

However, Mukuro uttered a baffled groan.

A huge volitant object gliding from the right had obstructed Mukuro’s assault.

Needless to say, even with the coverage of Fraxinus’ Territory, guarding against a Spirit’s attack with mere fragments of metal was a downright impossibility. It appeared that plates of armor from the nearby spaceship battle had drifted over to their location. But this had only defended against the laser beam direct attacks. The metallic scraps which had withstood Mukuro’s attacks abruptly sent Shidou crashing backwards due to the sheer might and pressure.

“Guah… ugh!”

“A-Are you okay, Shidou!?”

Unsure of how far he had been pushed away from Mukuro, the plate of armor finally stopped with a wobble. It looked like Tohka had caught up to Shidou and brought the piece of metal to a painstaking halt.

“A-Ah… Thanks for that, Tohka. By the way—”

Shidou gently placed his hand on the metallic plate which had conveniently protected him.

“It's such a coincidence for this piece of metal to float right between Mukuro and ——”

Speaking until that point, Shidou suddenly stopped his words.

“Eh…?”

He saw a certain something inside that segment of plated armor.

◇◇◇

“……Fuh. Besmirched vermin hath been ridded of.”

Vacantly gazing at the universe which had undergone an influx of metallic projectiles with those hollow eyes of hers, Mukuro heaved an unemotional sigh.

The piles of machinery scrap irregularly floating throughout the space surrounding Mukuro gradually began to reassemble into humanoid robots.

Each of them directed hostility towards Mukuro, although only to have their eliminations meted out by her afterwards.

Mukuro snatched a piece of levitating plate armor and attentively scrutinized the item.

“Great deals of absurd visitants today. Hmm…”

She tossed aside the robots’ mechanical brains and looked beyond.

“None could rival thee, Shidou.”

There stood a teenage boy whose pupils ignited with a staunch, determined flame, along with a young girl who stood in between them to protect him.

“Forswearing thy laboriously recuperated life so rathely? Such a fortuity haps not twice.”

Mukuro firmly gripped onto <Michael> as she vocalized. Beads of cold sweat dripping from his forehead, Shidou fixed his passion-kindled eyes onto her.

“I won't run away. I've said it before, but I'll be opening that heart of yours.”

“Thy hypocrisy is like a maze lest I be snared; Muku said thus heretofore withal.”

As she retorted so while half-opening her eyes, Mukuro motioned to the environs with stretched hands.

“——In that contingency, what decide thou? Dost thou desire to persist with frittering away these iron marionettes? Thou art no longer capable of pulling off any more crafty shifts.”

“So what——even if they're disintegrated, they can still be used.”

Shidou curled the corners of his lips, lifting up the pseudo-<Michael> in his hands. As if in response to this, the scattered humanoid parts flew towards Mukuro like small aerolites.

However, that was not all.

“Tohka!”

“Un!”

Accompanying that fervent shout, Shidou and the girl swiftly darted towards Mukuro together with the innumerable projectiles.

—They intended to corner Mukuro into revealing a hidden weakness by using the driving momentum of the combined attack.

“Nay……”

Mukuro immediately denied that idea which surfaced in her mind, narrowing her eyes as she did so.

“Haaaaa!”

And as if to disrupt Mukuro’s thought process, the girl mightily wielded the great sword with a piercing shriek which threatened to lacerate her.

Despite that, this attack was not meant to be a devastating blow which would slash Mukuro’s body. Not even the slightest hint of bloodlust could be perceived from the girl’s sword technique. A companion of Shidou who had made a promise to help him save other Spirits would never actually slice her into two halves.

Such an attack could be easily blocked. Mukuro forcefully held onto <Michael>.

“----”

However, the moment before she received the blade, Mukuro had her body dodged aside and brushed past the attack.

“Uwah!?”

Thinking that Mukuro would evade her attack before it even came close, the girl unexpectedly staggered forward. Mukuro gave the girl’s shoulders a kick, rendering her completely off balance and even spinning considerably due to the rotation.

In an instant, a gate opened in the space behind Mukuro, and <Michael>’s tip could be seen extending out at a high speed.

“What----?”

A panicked wail escaped Shidou’s lips—shifting his vision inside, a stupefied expression appeared on Shidou’s face as he held onto his <Michael> with both hands.

As Mukuro had anticipated, the tip of Shidou’s <Michael> had been engulfed by the portal-like gate which rifted across the void of space.

“As foreseen.”

Mukuro let out a hum.

Drawing Mukuro’s attention through numerous projectiles, Tohka’s attacks, and even opening a gate with <Michael> in order to dimensionally connect the spaces beside him and behind Mukuro——if Shidou’s duplicate of <Michael> possessed power which paralleled the original, there would be no doubt that he would think of such a plan.

In reality, this was dexterously utilizing an angel's unique characteristic; a very pragmatic move.

—However, that strategy would not work against an opponent who genuinely wielded the angel and knew very well the ins and outs of its abilities.

“Remorseful forsooth. With this, thy quietus.”

Mukuro laconically verbalized and thrusted the key-shaped staff in her hands into the gate which Shidou had opened. The tip of the key extorted Shidou out of the space which had been distorted by the power of an angel. This way, everything would come to an end. Even for Shidou, if the functionality of his body was sealed, he would not be able to move even a muscle.

But as <Michael>’s spike was just about to stab his body—

“Hyaa!”

An unrestrained yell resounded as Shidou’s body rapidly shrank, transforming into the petite figure of a young girl with unkempt hair and a displeased grimace showing on her face. She hugged her own head as if to dodge Mukuro’s attack while uttering with a voice which contrasted her actions.

“N-N-Now, Shidou!”

“—Hm?”

The unpredicted change in circumstances startled Mukuro, causing her to suddenly broaden her eyes at the events unfolding before them. And at that exact moment, she sensed an unexpected presence appearing behind her.

“……Huh?”

Mukuro looked back. Not knowing when or how, she discovered Shidou standing right at her back with <Michael> grasped in his hands.

“Inconceivable. What art thou—”

“—I'm just a random high school student.”

Quick with his words, Shidou swiftly lunged forward with <Michael>.

The key’s end impaled the vulnerable Mukuro’s chest.

Exactly when, how, and whence; each of these doubts frantically slalomed around Mukuro’s head. Even so, they were sustained for a mere few seconds.

“…… <Unlock-Rātaibu>!”

Coinciding with Shidou's voice, he rotated the <Michael> punctured in Mukuro.

"Ah————"

In a fleeting split second, Mukuro felt the entirety of her innermost being, which had been sealed for what seemed like an eternity, as if it had been instilled with a coruscating kaleidoscope of fallacious illusions.

◇◇◇

"Fuh——"

"——Haaaa!"

Origami's <Einherjar> and Artemisia's laser saber traded ferocious slashes with each other one after another, erratically dispersing glitters of magic throughout the dusky cosmos.

"Kuh……"

The critical strikes of the saber as it meandered around her spear battered Origami's arms. It was not difficult for one to perceive that each and every blow executed by her opponent bore persistent killing intent and unswerving might.

But Origami was not blithely and thoughtlessly receiving attacks. The present Origami could now exert a never before used combat tactic.

"——<Metatron>!"

With a loud shout, scores of wing-like feathers manifested on Origami's back.

Each of them appeared to be flying with different wills of their own.

Afterwards, the entire front ends of these plumes aimed at Artemisia, setting her as their target and discharging blinding rays of light together.

"Oh."

Artemisia lightly exclaimed, soon swaying her slender body to evade the assault.

"You're not getting away."

Origami fixed her eyes onto Artemisia in a sharp stare, transmitting instructions through her mind to the <Metatron> soaring in space. Following this directive, half of the feathers fanned out behind Artemisia, emitting a mesh of laser beams and sealing off her escape routes. The remaining half flocked together at <Einherjar>'s front end, taking the shape of a titanic drill.

"Hah!"

The light rays being exuded from the rapidly whirling <Metatron> fused into a spiral helix, attacking straight at the aligned Artemisia.

"——Not bad."

Artemisia gently snickered and narrowed her eyes.

The next instant, the wing-like structures attached to Artemisia's jetpack on her back zeroed in on the gathered <Metatron> feathers and blasted magical bombardments.

"Kuh…!"

Two light beams collided with each other, releasing destructive shock waves radially. Nevertheless, the confrontation between both combatants did not persist for long. Artemisia hurled the laser saber in her hand towards Origami's head.

"Chi…"

Tautly furrowing her brows, Origami retracted her back as she steered clear of the projectile. However, analyzing this to be an uncommon chance, Artemisia somersaulted her body using the spear <Einherjar>'s handle as a foothold in order to break out of Origami's encompassing net.

"Phew… That was a close one."

Distancing herself from Origami, Artemisia exhaled a breath of relief after magnetizing back her sword, which she had previously thrown, by manipulating her Territory.

"A combination of spirit and magical energy, eh? How exceptionally intriguing… though I regret to say that now is not the time to be playing around. A winner needs to be determined——"

At this moment, Artemisia's words abruptly ceased their flow.

Origami's face was painted with a flummoxed impression, oblivious as to what had

exactly occurred—only for it to be replaced in a flash with one of realization once she adjusted her line of sight to Artemisia's.

<Goetia>——the great spaceship piloted by Ellen Mathers was currently descending towards Earth while releasing clouds of charred fumes.

"Ellen!? That <Goetia> was…!?"

Having always maintained a composed and unruffled expression, Artemisia displayed a shaken guise for the first time. Knowing better than to act carelessly, Origami opened her mouth while pointing the tip of her spear at Artemisia.

"——It's your loss, surrender obediently."

"……"

Artemisia was bereft of speech for a moment before she intently stared at Origami with keen eyes afterwards.

"……Don't be mistaken. Ellen's defeat is indeed beyond expectations, but that doesn't spell mine. That's because our objective today is——"

"————"

"To bring down Spirits."

"Ugh……<Metatron>!"

Instantaneously, Origami seized the opportunity as Artemisia glanced to the right and issued commands to her angel <Metatron>.

But——she was too slow. The magical power artillery shot by Artemisia's equipment brushed past <Metatron>'s attack and made a beeline for Shidou's and Mukuro's coordinates.

◇◇◇

"A-Ah…"

A line of vision was hazily obnubilated with nebulous blurs. Oddly nostalgic sensations as if blood briskly flowed to her numbed limbs. Mukuro's bosom

tightened at the sudden transformation of the environment, perplexed and bewildered as it became enveloped in complete chaos.

—— Chaos.

Indeed. This matter prevailed as an anomalous phenomenon in itself.

The Mukuro whose heart and soul had been sealed off by <Michael> would have never been able to even feel such fond sentiments.

——Ah, rather, it was due to this. That's right. Little by little, Mukuro had understood. The key stabbed inside <Michael>. Shidou, Itsuka Shidou.

<Unlock>. He had unlocked it. He had unlocked Mukuro's heart. He unlocked the seal on Mukuro's heart. He unlocked the permanent seal which had forever isolated Mukuro's heart. The river of emotions was flowing; it was emptying itself into Mukuro's heart. Mukuro experienced formerly invisible colors, now vivid with intense hues and animated tinctures.

Indignant anger at having her heart breached unceremoniously; tantalizingly fascinated by how Shidou implemented a serendipitous plan; and most of all, a particular feeling towards the person who had up to this point relinquished without hesitation all regard for his personal safety in his struggle for Mukuro's sake——

"Mukuro!!"

Due to the overwhelming surge of a wide range of different emotions, such a voice reverberated in her consciousness without warning. Since the synchronous link between those feelings and her mind had not been made yet, attempting to manage a reaction to that proved to be too much of an arduous toil. But somewhere in Mukuro's head, information being obtained from her field of vision allowed her to conjecture the current state of affairs.

Drawing near, a ray of light was aimed straight at Mukuro.

What Shidou had referred to was definitely this. But. However. Yet. The violent bursts of emotions rendered Mukuro incapable of properly mobilizing her own body. It would take no more than a trifling moment for that beam of light to perforate Mukuro's physique.

Ah, how frightening.

——Fear.

Fear towards pain and fear towards death, a long unfelt terror rapidly circulated throughout Mukuro's heart.

However.

"Guh…!"

The next instant, the built-up fear stil accumulating in Mukuro's chest was entirely replaced with another feeling.

Shidou had firmly embraced Mukuro in order to protect her against the raiding light beams.

"Ah——"

"<Zadkiel>……Ugh!"

Accompanying that yell, a shield of solid ice formed behind Shidou, which, soon afterwards, suffered the direct brunt of a thunderous magic explosion.

"Ha…Ugh!"

The fleetingly created icy shield seemed to be unable to bear the sheer might of that attack. With excruciation, Shidou and the embosomed Mukuro were sent flying out.

Mukuro discerned a mysterious feeling.

When Mukuro ruminated on how the inexplicable warmth which bestrewed her surroundings until now had vanished all of a sudden, a specific, indistinguishable force began to vigorously pull her.

It did not take long for her to notice that this force was terrestrial gravity. After being sent soaring by the impact of the light ray, Shidou and Mukuro were separated from the fantastic Territory which had been constantly engirdling Shidou.

If they were to continue in that state, they would plummet into the atmosphere. Mukuro resolved to utilize <Michael> to open a gate leading towards a safe place. Yet—her body refused to obey no matter what she did.

"Guh——<Raphael>! <Zadkiel>!"

As Shidou summoned, a tornado swirled and wall of ice grew around them.

“Are you okay… Mukuro! I’ll definitely… protect you… ugh!”

After declaring so, Shidou clasped Mukuro to his bosom with even more strength. Thump, thump; the beatings of their hearts propagated through their bodies.

“＿＿＿＿”

A certain color emerged from the profusion of emotions.

But before what that shade alluded to could be seen; Mukuro’s and Shidou’s bodies had already plunged into the azure planet.

Chapter 7 - The Unlocked Heart

——Ear-piercing gunshots and earth-shaking explosions rumbled one after another. Shattering footsteps and auguries of destruction, the accumulation of matter fell into ruin and collapse, crumbling uninterrupted and performing an overture which preluded the inevitable end.

Ratatoskr's general headquarters were currently being cornered into a desperate state of affairs. The prime culprit was, without a doubt, DEM Industries. Similar to Ratatoskr, they transcended all human knowledge and intelligence and stepped into the realm of the gods. They were the possessors of Realizer units.

Naturally, Ratatoskr would not have opened their doors to enemies unprepared. It would not even be an exaggeration to say that their defense system was the best in the world. Several warning systems which continuously scouted for foreign entities had been implemented by means of the aerial guard barriers established through Realizer units. On top of that, the invisibility camouflage thoroughly concealed the location of the base.

The most important defense tactic for a strategic stronghold was neither to be an unwavering citadel in the face of any sort of attack nor to be provided with formidable might capable of routing any enemy raid no matter how fierce.

Instead, Elliot Woodman thought it was to become a hidden fortress absolutely undetectable by any adversary.

Ratatoskr was per se a secret organization. Since its objective was not national defense, there was no exigency to advocate its power in neutralizing the enemy. On that account, their center of operations was not embellished like a feudal lord's gilded palace, nor was it an emblem of position like the Ministry of Defense. On the contrary, to be precise, conspicuity would simply imperil and lead them to their demise.

Furthermore, only a minuscule minority of Ratatoskr's personnel were aware of the whereabouts of the base. Those that were permitted to visit consisted of merely the aircrafts which maintained the concealment as well. Regardless of whichever country's information agency, it was impossible of ferreting out the existence of such a massive facility at those coordinates.

And apropos this aspect, as Ratatoskr's arch nemesis, DEM Industries should not

have been an exception. However, this supposed imperceptible defense barricade had been unexpectedly broken through, owing to the omniscient demon king <Beelzebub>.

“Although I wasn’t entirely taken aback, I didn’t expect to be done away with by such a beauty. No wonder it’s you, Ike.”

Woodman slightly shrugged his shoulders as he muttered so.

He was a man of around fifty years old who tied his mixture of white and blonde hair into a single bundle. Despite finding himself in a mare’s nest, he was taking the situation lightly.

Nevertheless, this was nothing out of the ordinary. Woodman was Ratatoskr’s highest commanding officer, head of the Round Table. In other words, he was the organization’s very leader himself. As a result, Woodman had to remain calm in the face of those events. If the commander were to lose his nerve, the lack of morale would exponentially extend to his subordinates and result in the chain of command going out of control. As one of an eminent status, he needed to adopt a composed and poised smile at all times. Even until his passing, Woodman firmly held this belief.

Besides, it was true that Woodman had indeed anticipated an outcome where he would have an unfortunate encounter with an incursion from DEM Industries. Seeing that Woodman’s former ally as well as present foe, Isaac Westcott, had acquired an all-knowing demon king, it was not a demanding venture to predict that the knowledge which he wanted to know the most were the locations of any unsealed Spirits and his own whereabouts. After all, he was he regarded as a despised traitor.

For this reason alone did Woodman relocate to his current base, which possessed the highest-level defense system out of all owned by Ratatoskr.

“——You’re jesting. Isaac isn’t one to think something over much. He is, however, a child who wishes to flaunt his newly received toy to you, his old friend.”

The woman who was standing next to Woodman and appeared to be of North European origin with tied up blonde hair insipidly said so. Her elegant blue eyes glanced at Woodman through her fine lenses.

Karen Mathers. She served as Woodman’s personal secretary and was the world’s strongest Wizard’s, Ellen Mathers’, biological sister. Like Woodman, she had once been a member of DEM’s technical staff as well. As such, she was able to make such precise evaluations of Westcott. Woodman could not help but ease up the

corners of his mouth.

“Perhaps that may be right on the mark. Ike was always steadfast, though that might be why he’s such a treacherous person. Think about it. What’d happen if he were to wait inside a room full of nuclear warhead launch buttons with only curiosity plaguing his exuberant mind?”

“I couldn’t imagine how dreadful that’d be. He’s literally a psychopath.”

Karen put on derisive look as she stated so. She then lowered her head to view the miniature device in her hand and raised it back after carrying out a string of operations with great deftness.

“—Escape route confirmation complete. This way.”

“All right, what about the handling of the data?”

“No issues. Of course, if Ike’s new plaything pries into it, there would be nothing we could do.”

“It doesn’t matter. Well then, let us depart. Issue a retreat command to the other personnel as well.”

“Understood.”

Karen lightly nodded, soon reaching under a table with her hand and pressing a hidden push button. In response, the wall behind the table began to retract, revealing a secret elevator used for fleeing during emergency times.

“Excuse us.”

Thus, Karen entered the lift while holding onto the handles of the wheelchair transporting Woodman.

Once the two had got inside, the doors rigidly shut. After Karen performed a series of steps on the panel installed in the wall, the elevator began to descend downwards, accompanied by the muffled sounds of mechanical gears.

Not long afterwards, the oscillations came to a standstill, and the doors facing opposite directions simultaneously unlatched. What was unveiled before the couple was a dim passageway paved with reinforced concrete and extending straight as if it was unending.

“A helicopter is waiting at the end. Please bear with it.”

As she spoke, Karen started pushing the wheelchair down the dusky corridor.

But——before a few moments even elapsed, the clattering sounds of Karen's shoes and the creaking of the wheelchair's wheels echoing on all four sides suddenly quietened into utter silence.

The reason was obvious.

The silhouette of a human figure came into view in front of them.

"——Greetings, Elliot. It seems to have been ages since we've last seen each other face-to-face."

A man clothed in sable Western fashion, whose countenance bore a malicious grin, casually articulated so.

"……"

As if acting in response to the existing situation, the handlebars of the wheelchair quivered a little. Even for Karen, maintaining an unreservedly tranquil manner when confronted by such circumstances turned out to be especially grueling. However, to be able of restraining her own trembling to such a diminutive extent in *his* presence, Karen's guts warranted sufficient commendation.

"It appears so… Long time no see, Ike."

Woodman spoke the name of the man standing in front of them, narrowing his eyes in the process.

Once flaxen hair which had deteriorated into lackluster, suffuse metallic cast after beholding various transfigurations of the world over time, along with a pair of placid eyes as motionless as stagnant water. If all the cataclysmic catastrophes and everything corrupt in this world were to converge and forcefully mold a human being, it would roughly look like this. Despite knowing that this opinion was rather excessive, these offending thoughts still appeared naturally in his mind. This only implied that the man before him was truly such a person.

Woodman's weakened eyesight could at most vaguely discern the posture of the man even with his spectacles worn. However, that enigmatic voice of his as well as his murky mien and that peculiar ambience surrounding him told Woodman that he was once a precious friend who cherished the same ideals and followed the same path as him.

"Never did I think that you would go so far as to await me here. There were plenty of other hidden escape routes prepared just in case, too. Another one of

<Beelzebub>'s ability, I presume?"

Hearing Woodman's question, Westcott exaggeratedly shrugged his shoulders.

"No, no, nothing of that sort. To my chagrin, <Beelzebub> was scribbled all over by one of those Spirits of yours. Finding this place perchance was due to plain intuition. I merely felt like I would definitely choose this location if I were you."

"I see. Well deserving the title of my old rival, noisy as usual."

Woodman and Westcott laughed together as if their minds were telepathically linked.

"Well then… state your business. If you wanted to pay me a visit, the way you knock on the door of an old friend is quite coarse, don't you think?"

"Aah, my apologies. It's not that much of a deal, to be frank. I simply fancied for Karen and you to accompany me back to DEM."

Westcott talked in a leisurely tone. Or rather, from his perspective, this manner of speaking was perhaps a normal standard, even if it meant the collapse of an organization.

Neither astonishment nor ire remained on Woodman's face after listening. He subsequently raised the corners of his mouth.

"And what will you do if I blatantly refuse? Kill us?"

"Heavens of course not, that would defeat the purpose of Her Excellency Ellen's absence. I'd like to respect your will, and not go against your wishes.

Except that… if you aren't willing, then as a substitute——"

Westcott shrugged his shoulders, narrowed his eyes once, and extended his right hand forward.

"<Beelzebub>."

He calmly called out that name. In the fraction of a second, a tenebrous maelstrom eddied around his hand, seething with an inky jet-black effervescence before finally manifesting in the form of a book.

"——Come on, won't you entertain me for a little bit?"

"Huh……"

Seeing with his own eyes, the materialized item enshrouded in obscure miasma, Woodman gently heaved a sigh and placed his hand on his lower jaw as if fumbling with the bristles of his chin.

His opponent was a demon king. If possible, Woodman would have never wanted to be faced with such a confrontation.

However—under these circumstances, he could not say such willful words.

"…I guess there's nothing that can be done. You were always an impossible fellow."

Woodman lightly sighed, abruptly pouring strength into his arms and unhurriedly lifting his body from the wheelchair little by little. Yet his shoulder was pushed back down by Karen instead.

"That's out of the question, Elliot."

"Don't worry, Karen."

"But."

Woodman smiled and tenderly brushed away Karen's hand, unsteadily tottering forwards.

"……At the most, I still have my left and right hands."

He then whispered in an inaudible voice as he stood before Westcott.

"In that case… let us begin. Speaking of which, Ike, this must be the first time I've faced you head-on."

"Isn't that so? I am remarkably weak after all. Just standing in front of you keeps sending shivers down my legs, Elliot."

Westcott extemporaneously ridiculed with considerable buffoonery.

Woodman exposed a broad smile in reply to Westcott's jeering joke and then drew out from his chest a golden article which resembled a name tag.

◇◇◇

Although every individual person had differing opinions with regard to precisely how long their reasoning can endure before senility got the better of them, reversing the question into how early one became capable of remembering, I would answer at around five years old.

Looking back, I had always been alone back then.

This was not an abstract question. Nor was it philosophical topic which evoked self-evaluation. It was pure and unsophisticated; it allowed one to see the light shining onto oneself. Parents, brothers and sisters—predetermined existences who were supposed to be there—something known as a family had not been there by my side.

When I had realized that fact, my feelings—to tell the truth, I could not really recollect to the extent that I was unable to put into words even the type of emotion I felt. Naturally, it was by no means one which comforted the heart, yet this sensation was unlike simple sorrow or solitude. To state why, it was an emotion predicated upon being deprived of one's own family; grief due to having experienced the warmth of a family; loneliness because of not being by oneself at first.

I had been alone from the start, therefore defining this feeling as loneliness was perhaps far-fetched. It was unavoidable as well. After all, children bestowed with the quiddity of having a family were *special*. As I was not *special*, it was unavoidable. If I had to say, I deemed it closest to a form of philosophical nihility.

——But again, how long has it been since then?

At a certain point, those days suddenly ended.

For the first time, I obtained a family.

Of course, they were not related to me by blood. Just a married couple, who had wanted a child, that took a fancy to me and suggested adopting me.

Through what procedure which they applied for my adoption, I could not recall anymore. Rather, to be honest, even though I still faintly remember the words said to me by the staff, my young self then had not really comprehended their meaning.

Nevertheless, such things did not matter.

To me, to the self who had always been alone, this was the first time I had a family.

This truth held too much of an impact, even causing me to be at a loss.

Father, Mother, alongside a girl who was soon to become a sister to me.

My own family, a family I belonged to.

“Hello. From today onwards, we’ll be your family members.”

The instant these words from Mother reached my ears.

“——, ah, uh, aahh.”

Tears gushed out from the rims of my eyes.

It felt as if brilliant colors were painted into an entire world of black and white.

People who loved me.

People who I could love.

So I swore—to do all I could to love them—to love my father, mother, and sister.

◇◇◇

“……, Ah……”

Shidou groaned in a low voice and unraveled his eyes.

“That was…”

There was an impression as if an inconceivable dream had just taken place; a dream which caused people to cherish yet was rather vague, a dream which induced sadness, but also gave off tender warmth.

“Nn……”

Within his dimmed consciousness, Shidou felt a slight itch irritate his cheek, so he wiped his face with his hand.

It was then that he immediately realized—those were moist teardrops dripping on his face, obviously not the volume exuded by a petty yawn. It looked like they were shed during his slumber.

“…What happened to me…?”

Shidou fiddled with the fringes of his hair as he surveyed his surroundings.

Soon, his blurred field of vision clearly projected objects.

It appeared that he had been sleeping atop a bed. Subsequently, a pure white wall and ceiling entered his line of sight. This place ought to be Fraxinus’ infirmary.

Shidou unhurriedly straightened his upper half upright, substantially stretching his body. His stiff muscles pained him, his joints clacking moderately.

At that moment, the door to the room abruptly flew open, and the Spirits entered the room one after another, led by Kotori.

“Excuse us…… Wha, Shidou!”

“Ooh! You’re awake!?”

Filled with astonishment, everybody widened their eyes round. Shidou made a wry grin as he charged into them.

“Aah… I’ve just come to.”

Shidou forced a laugh in reply, causing Tohka, who was standing behind Kotori, to incline her head as if noticing that something was amiss about Shidou.

“Shidou, is something wrong? Were you crying?”

“Ah, it’s nothing… I was just feeling a bit drowsy.”

Since saying that having a dream had made him weep turned out to be complicated indeed, let alone the fact that he did not want to make everyone worry, Shidou made an effort to gloss over it by putting on a smile.

“……”

Whether Kotori perceived something awry from Shidou’s attitude or otherwise, she exposed a doubtful expression, only to immediately sigh with helplessness and look at him afresh.

“Forget about it. ——More importantly, Shidou, is your body all okay?”

“Eh? Ahh… I think I’ll be fine…”

Although Shidou was momentarily puzzled by Kotori’s solemn appearance, he

quickly dismissed it with a gulp. With Kotori's words as the catalyst, his formerly equivocal, unclear memories perspicuously resurfaced in one go.

Prior to losing consciousness, while embracing Mukuro, Shidou had gone through atmospheric entry with no more than his corporeal body as a shield.

Even with the added protection of an angel, such insane, daredevil stunt would undoubtedly result in anxiety and distress for Kotori.

"Where's Mukuro…… How's Mukuro!? Is she alright!?"

Shidou instantly got up with enough momentum to send the blankets flying.

Fortunately, with <Zadkiel>'s and <Raphael>'s safeguard, along with the healing from <Camael>'s recovery ability, there were no more conspicuous wounds on Shidou's body. However, due to losing consciousness before even landing on the Earth's surface, Shidou was unable to confidently ascertain Mukuro's welfare.

Afterwards, Kotori let out an untimely guise and began to speak.

"——Unknown, when we found you, any traces of Mukuro had already disappeared. Of course, we did consider the possibility of you two getting separated when you were in mid-air and carried out a large-scale investigation of your landing site……"

"Then… could it be that…"

Shidou could not refrain from showing perturbed consternation, to which Kotori shook her head as if to assure him that everything was going to be okay.

"Even if she got lost or anything, in any case, Mukuro's still a Spirit with a complete Astral Dress. From the point that you were discovered to be safe, it was proven that she would be as well. Assuming she had regained her consciousness before you after the both of you reached the ground, she probably decided that the best course of action was for her to run away and hide somewhere for the moment."

"I-I see…"

Listening to Kotori's elaboration, Shidou exhaled a breath of relief.

"……"

Yet not long after that, Shidou sank into deep ponderance again, gritting his lips. The fact that Mukuro was unscathed indeed deserving of elation.

However, her taking to her heels and downright uncertain whereabouts left Shidou at his wit's end and feeling powerless.

Shidou silently glimpsed at his right hand, clenching it into a fist——as if to reaffirm the lingering texture of the key previously grasped in his palm.

At the time of the conquest, Shidou had certainly pierced through Mukuro's bosom with his pseudo-<Michael>, thereby unsealing the lock placed on her heart.

But in the end, this was only the beginning. Granted that the deadlock on her heart had been broken, Mukuro's absence solely served to jeopardize the favorable impressions she possessed towards Shidou. Ultimately, he would have to no more than reawaken her emotions which had been sealed—or, in the worst case scenario, there was a chance that feelings which caused her to think deplorably of Shidou would emerge.

And as the pivotal crux that could influence the matter for either good or bad, during their first encounter, Shidou had already passed out. Although there was nothing he could do to prevent that, Shidou still creased his face in remorse.

"…Sorry for that everyone, even though you guys did so much for me, yet I…"

As Shidou uttered so, the Spirits consecutively broadened their eyes in surprise, shaking their heads with all their might.

"What nonsense are you spouting? We all know how great your efforts are."

"T-That's right. Don't say such things."

"Feeling quite depressed, aren't you? Want to rub my oppai? Though they haven't even grown to the level for fondling! Ahaha!"

Nia cracked an awkward joke. Droplets of cold sweat formed on Shidou's cheeks as he forcefully laughed it off.

"Eh, can I!? What service is that!! Are you the Virgin Mary!?"

Contrary to Shidou's reaction, Miku began to wiggle her fingers, her face flushed with arousal. However, since the subject of the conversation had started to go off-topic, not to mention inappropriate, Kotori and others restrained Miku.

"Miku, shut up for now."

"Ah~n! Evil!"

“Haa… really. Well, feeling dejected won’t do us any good. Besides, it isn’t like there wasn’t any progress at all. If you really want to repay our intentions, then start by cheering up and moving forwards.”

“A-Ah, yeah… You’re right.”

Shidou wryly smiled and nodded in agreement. It was as Kotori had stated indeed. Although brooding over the past was rather meaningless, not drawing a lesson from the setback and forging ahead would only bog them down.

Even if it was to have faith in everyone who had faith in him, Shidou definitely could not stay still.

“——Ah.”

Piecing together his thoughts up till here, Shidou suddenly stumbled upon something and exclaimed.

“What is it, Shidou?”

“By the way, Kotori, what happened to Ratatoskr’s base…!?”

Shidou tensely clasped his fist as he asked. —That’s right. Just before Shidou and the others proceeded to the cosmos, Fraxinus’ home port, Ratatoskr’s base, suffered an assault from DEM Industries.

Hearing Shidou’s enquiry, Kotori could not help but sigh as she answered.

“…Stating that it’s in good shape would be a little implausible. The damages are considerably fatal. We’ve no choice but to abandon that base.”

“I-It’s that bad, huh…… What about Woodman-san and Karen-san…!?”

“……”

Shidou revealed a trembling expression as he timidly questioned. Kotori then quietly fished out a scaled-down terminal from the pocket of her jacket, facing its screen towards Shidou.

“Eh……?”

Unaware of what Kotori intended of her conduct, Shidou was utterly befuddled. After a few seconds elapsed, the terminal screen displayed Woodman’s face.

“Woodman-san!!”

“——Aah, Shidou-kun. How’s your body? I heard that you underwent atmospheric entry with only your bare flesh.”

“A-About that…… I’m alright. Compared with that, what about you, Woodman-san….”

“You can consider me fine. Forgive me for making you worry—oguh!”

In the course of the communication, Woodman produced raspy sounds of dolor. Shidou’s eyebrows quivered.

“W-Woodman-san?”

“How does losing an arm and leg classify you as ‘fine’? Apart from ‘being covered all over with cuts and bruises’, you’re beyond description.”

A voice not of Woodman’s resounded, which rang a bell crisply, let alone femininely—it was Karen’s voice. Despite her tone of speaking being as smooth and steady as it always was in the past, for some reason, this time felt like she could hardly contain her temper.

“Hurry inside the medical Realizer unit at once. It is imperative that we maintain absolute stability immediately.”

Woodman forced a chuckle and looked at Shidou.

“Sorry about that. I’d prefer to chat with you for a little longer but, as you can see, Karen’s already in that state.”

“N-Not at all, it’s okay…… Though what did you mean by ‘losing an arm and leg’?”

“Elliot.”

“I get it; I get it, so stop whining, Karen.”

Woodman’s figure receded from the display screen, and the transmission was disconnected. Kotori shrugged her shoulders and put back the terminal.

“——That’s how it is. At least it looks like they successfully escaped.”

“O-Oh… I still think I heard something rather serious.”

“Well, I’m troubled too… but those two always try to secretly cover it up somehow and diverge from the topic.”

After Kotori gently exhaled a sigh, she revitalized her energy anew and crossed her arms.

“Anyway, you should get some rest, Shidou. We’ll take care of the search for Mukuro. If, by any chance, we found her and you couldn’t move, you wouldn’t even be able to converse with her.”

“Ahh, I understand… But I wonder where in the world Mukuro went…”

“We wouldn’t be in such a mess if we knew that. With that <Michael> of hers, she can go pretty much anywhere she wants. Maybe she’s already gone to some unknown part of the cosmos, or perhaps by some mishap she’s waiting somewhere in the vicinity——”

At that exact instant, the moment her words reached this point, Kotori’s voice was abruptly interrupted.

Her eyes dilated into perfect circles, soundlessly gazing in Shidou’s direction.

“Eh? W-What’s wrong, Kotori? Is there something… ——!?”

Shidou felt a wave of cynicism overcome him when he asked with a slanted head ——only to have his voice suspended like how Kotori’s voice had been a few moments ago. No, to be even more precise, it was due to the bewildering befuddlement that he had no other choice but to forcibly hold his breath and cease his speech.

Nevertheless, this was only to be expected. After all, without any warning, two hands had swished and extended outwards from behind Shidou, embracing his shoulders with a shrill chirrup afterwards.

The supernatural phenomenon rendered Shidou’s stiffened body fully numb till he could at most barely manage to turn his head back to get a glimpse of who, or what, was behind him.

“Eh……?”

Immediately as he braved his fear, Shidou caught sight of the facial features of a girl who had, unbeknownst to him, presented herself there. She had a dumbfounded expression and her eyes wide open.

“——Hueh, me seems thou hast procured cognizance.”

Vociferating so, the corners of the girl’s mouth eased up. Visible through her elegant long hair was a pair of glistening eyes shimmering with a resplendent

golden radiance and exhibiting a joyous semblance.

Shidou's train of thought was briefly thrown into disarray for a moment.

However, it was under no circumstances the result of the girl suddenly appearing without even the mention of a single passing greeting. In lieu of that, it resulted from his brain's utter inability to integrate the portrayal of the same girl he knew of with the current girl whose face was painted with a joyful, passionate, and simply happy expression.

Yet there was no mistake; the girl who entered the picture there was——

"M-Mukuro……!?"

The Spirit who had battled against Shidou in the cosmos, Hoshimiya Mukuro, had unwittingly emerged from a *gate* opened in plain mid-air, coiling her arms above Shidou's shoulders.

"Wha……!?"

"W-Why is Mukuro here…!?"

"Panic. How did this come to be?"

Shortly following Shidou, the Spirits expressed their astonishment one by one. They each gave a gravelly exclamation of 'Huh?' around the room.

Afterwards, Mukuro examined everybody, who stood on one side, but instantly shifted her line of vision away and teased Shidou's cheeks like playful whispers.

"To have the temerity to let Muku bide for thee, what a loathly man. No matter, Muku permits thee, thou who inspirited mine heart to such heights."

"Hah……, Eh……, Wha……?"

Wherefore is thy visage begrimed with chariness? Hehe, endearing man."

"……!?"

Mukuro enunciated intimately sweet verses while giving Shidou's nose a pinch or two. Dumbstruck, Shidou felt as if his senses had been hypnotized under a spell. This was no surprise, for in his opposition was a Spirit who had once ruthlessly dropped a meteor shower on him without a second thought.

To have her attitude soften within such a short period of time… no, *soften* failed to

serve it justice. Claiming that she was another person with an identical face would have been more convincing. Tohka and Kotori, too, were speechless as a result of the drastic disparity in behavior.

“Ah——”

Shidou knitted his brows, trying to outline the cause of this change.

“Could it be that this is because the lock on your heart was unsealed……?”

“……!”

Hearing Shidou’s conjecture, the other Spirits widened their eyes in surprise one after another.

That’s right. Comparing the moment he met her in outer space and the present, if anything were to have happened in between these two points in time, it would have to be the incident where Shidou had unlocked the seal on Mukuro’s heart.

In accordance with Shidou’s memory, the once austerely expressionless, but now scintillatingly vibrant girl was no longer her old self. This must be how her true nature had originally been before the sealing incident. No, even if that was the case, somehow it seemed like Mukuro was behaving excessively enamored with Shidou. Cold sweat began to form on Shidou’s forehead as he asked.

“M-Mukuro……? Why have you become so friendly all of a sudden? Or what made you want to get close to me? Um, I’m not saying that it’s a bad thing, uh, it’s a good thing actually……”

“Hueh?”

Mukuro let out an incomprehensible expression for a short while, replying afterwards.

“Is being ensorcelled by Nushi-sama, thou who followed Muku to the universe’s ends and did her liberation, such an aberrant affair? Contrariwise, Muku knows but an unchivalrous, malapert, contumelious man whose mouth is bestowed with troths of saving Muku and imparting her happiness.” [1]

“Ugu……”

The reality was indeed as she had said.

From Shidou’s perspective, before he made a firm resolution to save the Spirits, he had undergone a diversity of entangling predicaments and distressing situations.

On the other hand, from Mukuro's perspective, he was an 'I love you'-shouting philanderer who had appeared in front of her out of nowhere.

"Pardon, pardon. Nushi-sama is too adorable, irresistible to chaff."

Seeing Shidou utterly perplexed, Mukuro cheerfully giggled.

"My whilom pronouncements cozen not. In the course of the unlocking, what Nushi-sama apprised Muku of and what Nushi-sama brought about for Muku hath left her beholden to Nushi-sama for aye. These verses are sworn indomitably. … Forbye, if Nushi-sama were to beseech the impetus as to why Muku is desirous of thee, then that impetus would be——"

Mukuro flexed her fingers as if she was ruminating over and over, immediately clenching them with a clap afterwards.

"——Paradoxical, I surmise."

"……Hey, hey."

Shidou was forced to sigh at Mukuro's conclusion. Yet the girl merely resumed as she transmogrified her manner into a facetious one.

"Love, hate, and the like; once felt, exist verily as that. 'Paradoxical'—— ostends the similitude Nushi-sama and Muku partake."

"Similitude……?"

Towards the unclear divulgence whose meaningful significance was ill- defined, Shidou tilted his head in confusion. However, possessing good intentions towards oneself and cherished beloveds was nothing rare, and some kind of close-knit intimacy towards Shidou had blossomed within Mukuro. When Shidou was giving thought to this idea, Mukuro sincerely chuckled and continued.

"That is the essence. Nonetheless, Nushi-sama. Prithee, plight thy troth to Muku evermore."

"Troth?"

"Hueh. Nushi-sama pledged thus himself. To impart Muku happiness, thus claim Muku as thy flesh slave. …In deliberation, Muku fathoms not the vocable 'flesh slave'. Couldst thou enlighten Muku?"

Mukuro spoke so without the slightest apprehension and grasp of the weight her words were about to cause. All the Spirits dropped their jaws, furrowing their

eyebrows as the flabbergasting sentences entered their ears.

“Wha……!?”

“Shidou, is this true?”

“A-About that…”

“Uwah…… a pervert……”

“I-It’s not what you think! It’s a misunderstanding… though maybe this doesn’t count as one, but there’s a perfectly valid reason for this……”

“Wait a moment. May I disturb you for a minute, Mukuro?”

Just as Shidou intended to continue to provide an explanation for his actions, Kotori, standing in front, interrupted his speech. Mukuro exposed a confounded expression as she looked at Kotori.

“……Hueh? Speak thy mind.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you for the first time. I’m Shidou’s younger sister, Kotori.”

“Hoho……? In such circumstance, what honorable proceeding brings thee to Muku?”

“Shidou’s condition isn't very well right now. Mukuro, the injuries he suffered from hugging you while falling haven't fully recovered yet. —Of course, the promises he made to you are nothing short of the truth. …Though we'll leave the flesh slave part as an entirely different matter, Shidou’s serious about saving you. But if you could wait a little longer… ah, a day would be plenty.”

“Hueh.”

Listening to Kotori’s statements, Mukuro lightly hummed in a low tone.

Afterwards, she fumbled with her chin as she happily relaxed the corners of her mouth.

“Thus it is, thus it is. Wounded by Muku’s obliquitous hand, eh? Unhelpable in sooth, thus must wait tomorrow, true?”

“That's right, thank you for understanding! If possible, we'd like you to stay here and rest until then——”

“Thou needn't trouble thyself.”

Mukuro spread her palms as if to mask Kotori’s voice.

The next instant, Mukuro loosened her bosom and embraced Shidou by his shoulders, unhurriedly leaning her body forwards.

“——Thy bond surfeits. Grant Muku allowance as much as thy soul lets to revel in our merry morrow’s tryst, Nushi-sama.”

Just like that, Mukuro waved her hand and re-entered the previously opened *gate*, disappearing into the void. Once she had set her posture, the *gate* began to rotate about its center like a turbulent vortex and gradually shrank in size until it reached the peak of its implosion, vanishing without a trace and leaving the wall of the infirmary intact.

“……”

The medical room was then covered by a blanket of silence, only for Nia to cry out a ‘Phew!’ after a few moments of not being able to withstand the jumpiness.

“That really gave me a scare! What, so she’s the rumored Mukku-chan? Her character’s a bit different from what I heard!”

Nia shouted as if to exhale all the breath suppressed in her lungs. The other Spirits soon followed suit, unfolding their tensions.

“Astonishment. Nia is accurate. I believed her to be a much colder Spirit. That aside, Shidou, explain what this ‘flesh slave’ matter is about.”

“It’s because Shidou-san opened her heart…… right? About… the other thing… I mind.”

“Hnn, but it’s so cute. For such a delicate body, a man will always be a man.

Ehehe, Darling’s taste isn’t so bad.”

“……Miku, naughty. Not that Shidou is any better.”

“No! It’s all because of those choices!”

Everyone faced Shidou with deadly stares. Shidou feebly sighed, feeling the remaining warmth of Mukuro’s temperature on his shoulders, turning to look at Kotori afterwards.

“——Kotori.”

“Yeah, yeah. Although it pains me to say so, I’ll arrange your plans for tomorrow. After Ratatoskr’s had been renovated, we installed a new facility different from the previous medical capsule. Get some rest over there for today.”

“A new facility? What’s changed?”

“No telling, it’s a surprise. But I can guarantee the results. You’ll be there until tomorrow for a full recovery.”

Kotori hugged her arms as she said so. Shidou nodded in agreement and resumed.

“Alright, I understand. ——Thanks, Kotori.”

“Ha? W-Why are you thanking me?”

“Eh? Well, didn’t you delay it for another day in consideration for my body’s condition?”

“Wha……!”

When those words came out of Shidou’s mouth, Kotori’s face immediately flushed bright red.

“W-What are you saying! That’s just because preparations for support have to be made!”

Kotori shook her head left and right in a flurry to lessen the color of her cheeks. Seeing her in such a state, both Kaguya and Nia smirked evilly.

“Hoh hoh~”

“Imouto-chan is as always proud and charming like those in the books.”

“A-Anyway! Tomorrow’s the decisive battle! Make sure your body is shipshape by then!”

Kotori pointed at Shidou with great vigor, walking out of the infirmary without another word afterwards.

Gazing after Kotori’s receding figure, Shidou slightly made a wry grin.

“Haha…… Well, one way or another let me experience for myself that prided medical facility of hers. …Come to think of it, she left without even telling me

where it is.”

As Shidou scratched his cheek while wondering what to do, Miku clapped her hands once as if to snap him out of his daze.

“Ah——, we’ve used that facility before, so allow us to show you the way.”

“Un, I see. I’m in your hands then.”

“Hehe, leave it to me~. Hehehee……”

“……?”

A tittering laugh of unknown cause came forth from Miku; at least, it was unknown to Shidou, who inclined his head to an acute angle in skepticism.

◇◇◇

“……Uah~……”

Approximately thirty minutes had elapsed since then.

In an immensely spacious bathing place, Shidou soaked his worn-out body inside a pool of warm water. Correct. The place which Shidou had been guided to by Miku and the others was in fact an enormous bathhouse.

It was said that liquid yielded via Realizer units contained accumulations of magical energy; hence regularly bathing in it has curative effects. The implications comprised of healing fractures and contusions, alleviating fatigue on the human body. As an example, it resembled the healing fountains which existed inside the countless labyrinths and dungeons of RPGs, augmenting you back to full health once entered.

As a matter of fact, this was obviously much cozier and snugger than being admitted into a medical capsule for treatment. Shidou immersed his body from shoulders down in the heated milky-white water, comfortably letting out a deep breath again.

“I see…… This really isn’t so bad. No wonder Kotori was unnecessarily complicating things.”

Shidou smiled as he relaxed his body once more, looking up at the ceiling through hazy steam.

“Tomorrow……. huh.”

He then thought aloud in low whispers.

Despite the many past experiences, nervousness was one of the feelings that would still sure enough surface before a date with a Spirit. The main constituent was, however, the sense of uncertainty stemming from not knowing beforehand what kinds of dangers would occur——alongside the uneasiness of being unaware as to what to do in order to open the doors of the other party’s heart.

Indeed, Mukuro, whose heart had been unlocked, had become considerably intimate within a short amount of time; but even so, this by no means indicated that she would honestly agree to have her powers sealed. If she had originally been a frankly straightforward, cordial and unquestioned girl, there would have been absolutely no reason to seal off her heart with her angel.

“…Well, worrying now won’t do anything good.”

Shidou cupped some hot water in his hands and rinsed his face so as to loosen his cheeks, which had, unbeknownst to him, unconsciously become stretched taut.

Of course, it was not to say that training his imagination was entirely useless, but what Shidou genuinely needed to do now was in actuality follow Kotori’s instructions and adjust his body well for the next day. Otherwise, granted that his body was fully recovered, if he were to suffer from insomnia due to the anxiety and pressure, thus leading to his condition being less than fine, everything would be jeopardized and fruitless.

In brief, now was not the time to mull over such trivialities but to properly enjoy to the fullest the efficacy of the warm bath, which stood head and shoulders above all others. As Shidou concluded so, in order to bolster the efficiency of the recovery as far as possible, he now submerged every part of his body below his nose underwater, blowing bubbles in gulps.

——At that moment…

“……Hm?”

All of a sudden, Shidou wrinkled his eyebrows, owing to seeing several build- ups of bubbles which he deemed as not coming from his own breaths floating continuously towards the water surface.

Attentively inspecting the warm milky-white pool, one could chance on the murky silhouette of someone hiding beneath the surface. The appearance of the figure resembled a crocodile stealthily concealing its body underwater to catch prey.

"……"

After Shidou exhibited an astounded expression, the owner of the shadow threaded their way through the water with a swish and showed themselves in front of him.

"——Shidou."

"Uwah!?"

Startled out of his skin, Shidou abruptly bumped his head against the bathing pool's edge. Then, the person who appeared just now blankly extended their hand towards him with an inscrutable face.

"Don't be afraid, Shidou."

"……Origami."

Shidou recited the name of the girl aloud, simultaneously covering his eyes up with both hands.

The reason was there in plain sight. The Origami who had made an appearance right in front of his eyes had nothing but drops of water shielding her stark naked body.

"……Allow me to ask for a moment, what are you doing?"

"I want to scrub Shidou's back."

"You want to do that, yet you're hiding inside the pool?"

"Correct."

"While completely naked?"

"This is a custom of public bathhouses."

"……Anyhow, it's been ten minutes since I came in to bathe……"

"Ever since Shidou entered the pool, there has been an increase of the Shidonium content in the water."

“Shidonium!?”

Catching the name of an undiscovered chemical element, Shidou snapped back at her. In the end, Origami simply approached Shidou’s side with sounds of rustling water.

“Washing your own body when you’re injured should be difficult. Leave it to me.”

“N-No need! It’s fine! Let’s just assume that I had already been cleaned before I came in!”

“Not clean enough. The fact that there is still so much of Shidou’s smell is proof.”

“Only people with police hound-level noses like you and Tohka can smell that!”

Shidou emitted a noise close to a lament, but Origami paid no heed. Shidou’s hands which had been blocking his eyes were instantly seized away.

“Waa……!”

In a split second, Origami’s snow-white skin cast light upon his retinas, forcing Shidou to shut his eyes hastily.

Ultimately, Shidou was still a perfectly healthy male high school student. He would have been lying if he had said that he did not desire to feast on the ravishingly alluring unclad body of a gorgeous girl like Origami with his eyes.

Yet, how was he to put it; whether the entire thing was similar to a minefield fraught with danger or an insectivorous plant rigged with digestive enzymes, once he was befallen by the seductive temptation before his eyes and took action, the dire consequences which would proliferate out of control would be too ghastly to even contemplate.

But Origami provided not even a shred of care for Shidou’s unease and gradually reinforced the strength in her hands.

“Leave it to me. I’ll lick-……wash your entire body until it’s completely cleaned.”

“Did you just say lick!?”

“All right, just leave it to me.”

“Hyaa————————!?”

Origami pulled Shidou’s two hands apart in one go, gluttonously licking the nape of

his neck like a hungry vampire. Shidou could not help but wail loudly.

However, right as that was occurring.

“Darling~~~~~! I’m here to scrub your back~~~~!”

The bathroom’s door was suddenly thrown widely open, and Miku, in the nude, pounced into the pool.

“……Ugh.”

“Uaagh! M-Miku!?”

Shidou amplified the volume of his voice while he screamed, but to no avail as Miku swung her wet hair as if she was acting in a shampoo commercial, sparing no expense in flaunting those striking proportions of hers and smiling afterwards.

“That’s right! This Miku who has made you wait for a long time is now all yours! By the way, ahhhh! Origami-san is also here! I could die with no regrets!”

Noticing Origami’s coincidental presence, Miku swayed her body while swinging her hips and drew nearer to them. Although Origami did not utter a word, her face was full of pity for the wasted opportunity as she furrowed her brows.

Immediately following Miku’s trance-like preoccupation, more unexpected guests arrived at the bathhouse accompanied with a hubbub of clamors. ——Precisely, they were the other Spirits.

Everyone acted in accordance with their own personal notions concerning all kinds and sorts of ways they entered the bath, be it happily or rather shyly, as they walked towards Shidou.

“Shidou! Is your body okay!? I’ve come to help!”

“Kaka, satiated by the health-giving spring? Allow me to attend to you.”

“Translation. This is due to Miku’s appeal for scrubbing Shidou’s back, and the person who resisted with great difficulty to shamefully come here was Kaguya.”

“Who said anything like that!? Haven’t we bathed together before!?”

Tohka, Kaguya and Yuzuru all had only bath towels wrapped around each of their bodies. Figures and curves which were normally obscured with clothing were now evidently emphasized in display, rendering one oblivious as to where to direct their eyes.

Kaguya and Yuzuru seemed to be easily distinguishable from each other like usual, yet Shidou somehow felt as if his life could be placed in danger if he said something out of place, so he decided to obediently remain quiet about that. Was this the so-called soul of language? [2]

“Shidou’s recovery is of the utmost priority. Don’t forget that.”

“……So why again did you drag even me in here? This many people is obviously unneeded.”

“Ahaha…… The more the merrier.”

“Exactly! Isn’t taking a bath together with Yoshino wonderful, Natsumi-chan?”

“Together……!? T-That’s too… embarrassing……”

The next few who appeared included Kotori, Natsumi, Yoshino and her puppet Yoshinon, all adorned in an array of colorful bathing suits. Kotori was dressed in a scarlet bikini; Yoshino along with Yoshinon wore sea-blue frocks, whereas Natsumi accoutered herself in a striped swimsuit which alternated between cerulean and chalk-white.

“Yaa~, so many pretty girls gathering here is such a magnificent sight. Hihihi, I can’t take it anymore.”

The last one to enter was an audacious Nia, bursting onto the stage without any shame while completely naked. Judging from her behavior and manner, this girl from head to foot emanated an ambience which was one measly step from that of an old man.

“Make love.”

Nia swung the piece of cloth in her hand against her butt with a thud. Indeed, it resembled the bearing of an old man.

“W-Why have you all come here……”

Shidou was right in the midst of opening his eyes in protest of the shock when an arm stretched out from his side, and, in an instant, he discerned the sensation of something soft and large sticking to his back.

“Huh!?”

“Ehehe——, didn’t we say it before~? We’re here to scrub Darling’s back.”

Miku bewitchingly whispered beside Shidou's ear, causing huge beads of sweat to drip down from his face.

"T-There's no need, I can do something like that by myself……"

"Yaaa~, Darling~, you-meanie. I'll wash you until you're sparkling clean with this Miku-brand sponge."

"Uh……, wait……!"

Miku exposed a perfidious smirk, advancing towards Shidou as the clock counted down to the finale. Shortly afterwards, in order to curb Miku's savage lust, the other Spirits all rushed to Shidou's aid one by one.

"I-I say, what in the world are you doing, Miku!?"

"Shidou! Are you okay!? I'll clean your body now!"

"This is paradise~! Honjou Nia engaging!!"

Wait, I said wait… H-Hyaa————————!?"

◇◇◇

——In spite of Shidou being rather unable to recall the events and happenings of that time with considerable clarity, within the period of time between then and now, every time Shidou caught a glimpse of the messy pile of clothes inside the washing machine, his limbs would ceaselessly tremble and shiver as if reliving some traumatic phenomenon, vexing the poor boy to no apparent end.

◇◇◇

"——Where's Ike!"

Once she stepped foot inside DEM Industries' head office, Ellen immediately shouted in a strident voice without the remotest solicitude for her image.

“C-Chief Executive Mathers……!? What seems to be the matter, you’re injured ——”

The employee responsible for receiving guests in the lobby broadened his eyes as he enquired. Ellen impatiently clicked her tongue, clutching his necktie while demanding information.

“When did I say that you could worry about my body’s condition? Answer the question. Ike—where is he right now?”

“Hii……, uh, W-Westcott-sama has already returned…… I’m afraid that he’s currently in the infirmary.”

“I see.”

Ellen groaned and strode across the hall without uttering another word.

Even though a few other staff members had heard the tumultuous ruckus at the front and cast their wondrous sights to the scene, when they had realized that the owner of the voice was the second highest ranking member of DEM, chief executive Ellen Mathers, everybody averted their gazes as fast as possible.

However, right now Ellen did not thoroughly resent such paltry, inessential moods.

After suffering a crushing defeat due to a tactical error in the battle in outer space, approximately three hours had passed since the semi-wrecked <Goetia> touched down on the surface. Ellen’s state of mind was in a complete chaotic shambles as myriads of emotions intermingled within.

Hate-filled bloodlust towards the Fraxinus which let her experience a humiliating disaster for the first time in her life, bitter self-condemnation towards herself for being careless, along with——

“Keeping that raid of Ratatoskr a secret from me…… What’s with him——Ike!”

——exasperated wrath towards her comrade, Isaac Westcott.

Amid the entanglement of these uncontrollable feelings, Ellen got bogged down in a disposition close to altruism. ——Without even treating her severe wounds and only using her Territory to inhibit mass bleeding or pain, she had hurried back to DEM Industries’ headquarters.

“Ellen!”

When Ellen was domineeringly marching through the corridor, a female’s voice

resounded from behind her.

Within DEM Industries, only a meagre few were able to address Ellen directly by her first name. Ellen did not turn her head back but recapitulated the name of the voice's owner.

"……Artemisia."

"I finally found you. After I had gone to the weapons storehouse, I was informed that you had rushed to HQ. Is your body all fine?"

Thumping and quickening her pace, the blonde, ultramarine blue-eyed girl caught up. Ellen shot a glance at her with eyebrows furrowed in annoyance.

"Don't mind me. Or are you here to deride me?"

"You're saying that yourself again…… Ah, you're injured as I thought. Here, let me have a look at it."

"……"

Irritated, Ellen shrugged off Artemisia's helping hand, continuing to hasten her speed afterwards while throwing the door to the infirmary open.

"Ike!"

Yells which were far more than audible reverberated. All the medical staff inside the room immediately looked at Ellen. And among them was——

"——Why, if it isn't Ellen. You sure did return fast. Good work to you too, Artemisia. The both of you must've gone through a fairly arduous battle."

Isaac Westcott lightly touched on the topic as he always did in the past, waving his hand to greet the two.

"……Uh, about that matter, the blunder lies entirely on my part. I won't complain if you wish to investigate further. But, Ike, you also need to provide a reasonable explanation. For what purpose did you pay a visit to Elliot——"

However, halfway through her words, Ellen lost her ability to speak—and walk.

The cause was simple. The arm Westcott had waved at them started to neatly severe from the middle.

"Wh…… Ike, that."

“Hm? Aah.”

Westcott, as if just noticing after Ellen had reminded him, peered at the cross-section of flesh and bone.

“I was magnificently defeated by them. Fortunately, the front half of my severed arm was successfully recovered, and the cut was quite even. If I utilize the medical Realizer unit, I’ll be up and running by tomorrow.”

“Um, Westcott-sama……!”

The medical employees who were currently treating Westcott called out in a flustered manner. Naturally, such a reaction was to be expected when their patient suddenly waved his sliced hand around. They were utterly helpless at their predicament.

“Aah, pardon me.”

Nonetheless, Westcott merely replied in a tone which did not even harbor the slightest hint of pain, lifting and placing his hand back at their treatment anew.

“We’ll immediately proceed with the regeneration process. Is that fine?”

“Please do so. ——And that’s how it is, Ellen. I’m sorry but can we postpone our little chat until later? Speaking of which, you seem to be wounded yourself. Go and get yourself healed.”

“I-Ike……!”

No matter how much Ellen shouted his name as if to catch up with him, Westcott did not halt his steps, entering the handling room without another word.

Westcott’s figure then disappeared from view through the automated white doors. Ellen’s widened eyes remained so for a few more seconds before; at last, a furious expression surged to her face as she clenched her outstretched hand into a fist.

“U-Um, Chief Executive Mathers……? If possible, allow me to examine your injuries ——”

The voice trembling in fear and trepidation came from one of the medical staff who had stayed behind.

No ulterior meaning had been imbued in those words. Although they were instructions given by Westcott, there was no doubt that they were purely

concerned about Ellen's condition.

However, Ellen's present state of mind mirrored a water surface barely maintaining a state of equilibrium with what little surface tension left. Or perhaps, it resembled more of the volatile chemical compound nitrogen triiodide, which violently explodes at the softest touch. Via that tiny stimulus, Ellen slammed her tightly grasped fist onto the wall with a volcanic eruption of vehement emotions.

"……Argh!"

Bang! With such an intense noise, the medic was shrouded in a ringing silence.

……And what shattered that illusory peace were Ellen's tragic moans as she covered her fist and dropped to the floor, obviously requiring no further explanation.

◇◇◇

——I was taken in by my current family ever since.

Despite not knowing how much time had elapsed if truth be told, within that very period of time, I had indeed found coping with dissensions that my inner feelings marked as a nuisance.

After all, the fact that the mother who had given birth to me had abandoned me was more than sufficient to make me firmly believe that I was worthless, and the *philosophy* engendered therefrom had merely managed to fabricate a barrier that shielded my heart.

I had no way out because I was worthless.

I had no alternative because I had no purpose.

Only through such ways of thinking was I able to deceive myself of the envy and jealousy I harbored towards others.

Yet, the parents and sister who had suddenly appeared told me that I was needed.

Hence, I was taken aback, I was bewildered.

Who wouldn't be? I, someone who was supposed to be completely insignificant, became needed all of a sudden.

In the beginning, I had my doubts. In spite of saying otherwise, they would sooner or later discard me anyway.

But with the passing of time, I gradually realized that the only one who thought so was myself.

Nevertheless, in the course of understanding this point little by little, perhaps I should say that it was subtle distance between my family and me. The rigid relationship between us had begun to ease up.

……To be specific, it likely happened when I called my father 'Dad', when I called my mother 'Mom'.

——I remembered it to be May, during Mother's Day.

With unspent pocket money in hand, I ran towards the flower shop in front of the station by myself and bought a bouquet of carnations.

On the night of that day, after eating dinner, I gave the flowers to my mother as a present, hesitating before saying, "Thank you, Mom."

Even though she stayed surprise for a while, tears soon glistened in her eyes, and she tenderly embraced me.

That stir of emotions was truly too gentle, too warm, too tender.

When I noticed, my cheeks were already streaming with tears.

My father who had witnessed the scene delightedly smiled as well, caressing my head calmly.

Following closely, seeing my mother and I crying together from the side, my sister shouted, "Mom, Onii-chan, don't cry!" and rushed to us, myself already unaware of whether it was happy or funny——only knowing that my face was bathed in tears and that I was laughing in joy.

◇◇◇

“——All right. Have you made your preparations yet, Shidou?”

“……”

“Shidou? Are you listening?”

“……! A-Ahh, sorry. Of course.”

The second day aboard the Fraxinus’ bridge, Shidou rapidly raised his head with a ‘Hah!’ as Kotori yelled.

Kotori heaved a deep sigh and narrowed her eyes at Shidou.

“You’re really…… Be a little bit more serious. You are aware of who you’ll be dealing with today, aren’t you?”

“Gu…… I’m sorry.”

Shidou hung his down in embarrassment. Anxiously perturbed, Kotori furrowed her eyebrows.

“……Could it be that your physique hasn’t fully recovered yet?”

“Ah, it’s not that. My body’s fine.”

Apparently, he had caused her to worry. In order to flourish his rejuvenated vitality, Shidou substantially flexed his arms.

Indeed, due to the somewhat raucous din, Shidou’s memories of after the bath had become rather ambiguous and blurred, but the guaranteed effects of it were remarkably outstanding. On the contrary, Shidou’s current condition was even better than he had ever been before.

“It’s just that…… I had a slightly strange dream.”

“A dream? What was it like?”

“Hmm…… For some reason, it feels like a matter from the past, yet it doesn’t……?”

“……What’s that supposed to mean?”

Kotori returned a dumbfounded look to Shidou. This was understandable since even the speaker himself did not comprehend it very well either.

“……W-Well, in short, I’m alright. I’m ready now.”

Shidou patted his chest. Although Kotori's expression said that she was not quite convinced, she quickly shrugged her shoulders at her brother's utter incompetence.

"Forget it. ——You'll be up against Hoshimiya Mukuro. She's still a Spirit who doesn't have a sense of propriety yet. Even though her attitude's changed since you unsealed her heart, absolutely do not get ahead of yourself."

"Aah——I know."

Shidou bore an earnest look as he nodded. After all, he had been pushed to the brink of death numerous times by Mukuro's hands. Any amount of precaution or attention was not excessive.

That being said, what currently occupied Shidou's mind was not apprehension or dread.

Exactly, after everything that Shidou had undergone, he could now finally converse with a Mukuro whose heart was open.

When he had talked to her through the three-dimensional projection, Shidou had been outright refused unyieldingly. She had said the seal was dispensable, and so were friends; simply existing without emotions would do.

Her inhospitable, funereal utterances had once plunged Shidou into self- doubt. If he himself were to keep such ardent expectations, would Shidou be considered as meddlesome?

However, to hope for the genuine, unlocked Mukuro to get along with everyone ——

"I'll definitely make Mukuro fall in love with me."

That's right. That was Shidou's wish.

The Shidou now had no more confusion. As if to showcase his brand new resolve, Shidou gripped his hand into a fist.

In response, Kotori, Kannazuki, and Fraxinus' crew members consecutively nodded their heads.

With this firmed determination, in addition to the support which assisted that resolution, all preparations were complete. Now was perfect opportunity to conquer a spirit.

If any questions were remaining, there would be only one left.

"……Say, Kotori."

"What's wrong, Shidou?"

"……Where… should we go to find Mukuro?"

"……"

Shidou's words had left Kotori bereft of the same expression, speechless and eyebrows wrinkled.

In any event, that was par for the course. After Mukuro had drawn up an appointment with Shidou on the previous day, she immediately disappeared into the void; all destitute of a detailed time and place of meeting.

With a simple volitional statement of 'Let's go on a date tomorrow!' no whisper of news followed thereupon. His face full of tribulation, Shidou stroked his forehead. In their current circumstances, no matter how much they steeled their willpower, everything became pointless.

"I-Is it possible that she's stalling by running away… That couldn't be the case, could it?"

In the lower section of the bridge sat a crew member, <Nail Knocker>

Shiizaki, who said so while scratching her face. Analysis Officer Murasame Reine then shut her sleep-deprived eyelids and shook her head in dissent.

"……That's impracticable. If she had wanted to do so, she wouldn't have appeared before Shidou and the others yesterday. Believing that we possess some sort of contact method would be more appropriate. Look, isn't another *gate* opening behind Shin——"

At that moment.

The instant Reine spoke so, the airy space behind Shidou gyrated about itself like a whirlpool, slowly distorting the *gate* into a dark, gaping hole.

"Eh!?"

"T-This is……!"

Stupefied by the dramatic phenomenon, Kotori and the crew widened their eyes

and exclaimed.

But within these stringed-together sounds of consternation, solely Shidou's voice was not mixed. No——to be precise, due to the coordinates at which the <gate> manifested being right behind his back, it had already been too late when Shidou took notice of the irregular occurrence.

"Eh——"

As such, before Shidou was capable of even reacting towards it, his shoulders were seized by slender arms which extended from within the portal, dragging the boy inside.

"U-Uwaaaah!?"

"Shidou!?"

All Shidou could see was absolute darkness as a mere residue of Kotori's yell that lingered in his ears.

After a split second, what instantly expanded in Shidou's field of vision was a limpid, boundless sky, alongside——

"——Mufufu, the future hath present'd, and the present pass'd, Nushi-sama."

Hoshimiya Mukuro crouched beside Shidou with a lowered head.

"M-Mukuro……?"

Shidou broadened his eyes at a loss as he uttered her name, only for the person in question to sunnily smile and reply.

"Hn. What ails thee, Shidou?"

"It's nothing. Where is this……?"

Sluggishly, Shidou made an effort to stand up and survey all four directions to ascertain his surroundings.

"……Wha."

Soon after that, Shidou momentarily ceased his breathing.

Inevitable as it was, anyone would have done the same if they suddenly found out that the place on which they had been reclining until now was an asphalt road——

"……Huh, what's up with them two kids……"

"What the hell is that…… cosplay?"

"Hey, did you see some hole open up nearby just now?"

"Na~, Mama——, why's that Onii-san there sleeping in the street?"

An endless stream of pedestrians looked on through the crossroads of the thoroughfares.

The street before his eyes was nothing unfamiliar. This was a place which even Shidou often frequented and made his way through, one of the corners of Tenguu City.

"……! This is bad……"

Once more, Shidou retracted a gasp. The top-secret existence of Spirits and their powers could not be disclosed to the common populace.

It held importance, if their movements stood out too much, the Japan Ground Self-Defense Force AST and DEM Industries would become aware of their whereabouts. Shidou leaped upright in a hurry and tugged at Mukuro's hand.

"M-Mukuro, we need to go!"

"Whither?"

"J-Just follow me to somewhere without people first!"

"Hueh."

Mukuro nodded as if to make a riposte, intending to heave the giant key- shaped staff in her hand <Michael> afterwards.

"S-Stop! What are you doing!?"

"Hn? Are we not bound to a desolate clime? Thus <Michael>'s succor."

"That won't do! J-Just tag along first."

"Hoh. What obstinacy."

Shidou lead Mukuro by her hand into a small alley, deriving no resistance from the girl as she followed him with a cheerful face.

In spite of the pedestrians in the street sending the two glares of misunderstanding from the start, their interest was soon lost, and they reverted to being engrossed in their original matters. Although they had indeed been curiosity as a result of the intriguing affair, they by no means wanted to implicate themselves too deep in the interest. Shidou thanked the city people for their sense of personal isolationism in the matters of strangers with a gratitude which evolved from the bottom of his heart.

“Phew…… This should be far enough.”

As they arrived in a soulless alley wherein not even a single silhouette could be found, Shidou finally eased up and smoothed out his breathing.

Simultaneously, a rustle of static noise reverberated throughout Shidou’s right ear, and Kotori’s voice could be heard being transmitted from Fraxinus.

“Ahh, it’s connected……! Shidou, is everything alright!?”

“A-Aah…… You could say that.”

In order to enshroud it from Mukuro’s ears, Shidou quietly whispered his answer. Precisely, he had worn an earpiece for communication ahead of time so that he could be ready to take measures at all times in case Mukuro showed up.

“I never would have guessed that she would drag Shidou out of nowhere……

I was unprepared. We had the earphone reading fortunately though. The place you were taken to isn’t too far off, so that’s a big help. If she had transported you to the other side of the world, sending an automatic surveillance camera would have been problematic.”

Kotori elaborated while starting to unwind. Hearing her words, Shidou could not help but grin wryly. As a matter of fact, if Mukuro had really desired so, dragging Shidou towards an even worse location was not a complete impossibility. Finding himself in a site such as a street could be considered lucky despite the initial shock.

“I’ve some more good news. We’ve hurried to look into Mukuro’s happiness level ——and the outcome was that, unlike the previous, absolutely still magnitude, we can confirm her happiness level now to be stably changing.”

“That means……!”

“That’s right. It looks like Shidou’s move to unlock her heart is a success. If we continue to push on without a hitch, the numbers will work out to be enough to proceed with sealing her.”

“I see——that’s great.”

Just as Shidou and Kotori were conversing with each other, Mukuro poked Shidou’s face in befuddlement, her face adorned with incomprehension.

“——What twaddle prattle thou?”

“Waa! A-Ahh…… Sorry.”

Shidou’s shoulders gave a slight shutter as he turned towards Mukuro anew.

She complacently nodded and resumed.

“Come to phrase, how fancies Nushi-same to impart Muku happiness?”

“This, eh…… There’s a lot to do for that to happen, but……”

“Then acquit thyself of that lot. Tarry not, hie thee.”

As if to guide Shidou, Mukuro took the first step.

Yet to her chagrin, her foot was caused to stumble by her extensive hair, almost toppling over.

“Hn……?”

“Uh, are you okay?”

“Muku hath long forsaken the footslog yclept of walking. Huh…… some mire.”

Mukuro affectionately lifted her hair, brushing off the dirt.

Certainly, the present environment was nothing similar to the cosmos where Mukuro had spent what felt like an eternity. This was the Earth. It was a world where everyone on the ground was imprisoned within gravity. Even though Mukuro had her hair tied up in a Dango-style, the extent of its length would prove walking to be tremendously burdensome.

“Anywhere we go, we’ll need to tackle the problem of your hair first. ——I say, Mukuro, could you cut your hair a bit shorter——”

“——Absurd.”

Just like that.

Once Shidou requested so, the expression in Mukuro’s eyes sharpened as she

decisively answered.

“The sundering of mine hair is forbidden. Be their behest Nushi-sama’s or of whosoever, at odds we be.”

“……Eh!?”

At Mukuro’s reaction, Shidou’s shoulders could not refrain from quivering.

That was understandable. After all, Mukuro had been in a sanguinely jovial atmosphere up til now, but the mood had disseminated with such concentrated aggression in the next instant.

The siren of an alarm then resonated from Shidou’s earpiece; an all too familiar warning alarm. It signified——the deterioration of a Spirit’s mood.

“Shidou! Smooth things over quick!”

Kotori howled with agitation.

After a few seconds elapsed, as Shidou was at sixes and sevens about how to deal with Mukuro’s nosediving happiness, the girl too noticed the alteration in her manner of speech to a rather deplorable one and continued after a slight pause.

“……Trespass’d against thee. Whilst befogged of the wherefores…… natheless, Muku swears to do so.”

At that point in time, the sound of the alarm had already stopped ringing in his ear. Shidou deeply let out a sigh.

“I-Is that so. I should be the one who’s sorry.”

As he apologized, Shidou darted a look at Mukuro’s hair. It was a head of gently elegant, flowing golden hair. This fact became evident to him as he realized why she cherished her precious treasure. There was a saying that a girl’s hair equaled her life; to think Shidou had made such an indiscreet statement.

That being the case, it would not do to simply let her hair get dirtied with every step as well. Shidou peeked at Mukuro’s complexion while suggesting in utter fear and trepidation.

“But it’ll be hard if this goes on. W-What about…… having your hair tied up?

Would you disagree to that?”

“Hueh.”

Mukuro caressed her hair fondly, shaking her head.

“……Nay, ‘tis no matter if not trim’d. How so?”

“That, then——”

As Shidou was about to think of something, the earphone in his right ear began to transmit Kotori’s voice.

“——Shidou, the choices are here.”

Three options were shown on the main display monitor in Fraxinus’ bridge.

① Go to a hairdresser to obtain professional help.

② Have Shidou tie it up beautifully.

③ Prop up Mukuro’s hair from behind her as if supporting a ceremonial dress, occasionally rubbing against and licking her.

“——All crew members, select your choice!”

At Kotori’s orders, all the crew members in the lower bridge swiftly operated their individual consoles, picking the option each of them thought to be optimal.

Not long after, the result of the vote count was released.

“Option 2 occupies the majority, followed by option 1, huh. The one who chose 3 was……”

“That’s right, it was I!”

Once Kotori enquired, the person waiting at the side of the captain’s seat, Kannazuki, spiritedly clutched his hands and replied in full vigor.

“I like an open subordinate. As a reward, I’ll permit you to sit on an air chair for thirty minutes.”

“Eh! Can I!?”

Having heard Kotori’s words, Kannazuki heartily let out an ecstatic expression, jumping at the opportunity right afterwards by lowering his body and curving his knees into a perfect ninety-degree horse stance. Seeing him making a fool of himself, the other crew members forced a laugh one after another.

“Really, sometimes I wonder what goes on in your head. ——By the way, Maria.”

Kotori called out that name, to which the display monitor generated a string of the text ‘MARIA’, and the loudspeakers then broadcast the voice of Fraxinus’

AI, Maria.

“These choices, were they thought up by you?”

“First of all, regardless of how the personality and thought process of an AI is defined, every option is derived from each individual Spirit’s statistics as well as their up-to-date data, not from my own knowledge. ——Though I am capable of explaining the intended reasoning behind each option.”

“……Aah, I see. I had always somewhat noticed that there would unfailingly be a risky choice every single time. Do you have an outline of what that’s about?”

“Correct. If comprehensive analyses were to be performed on the patterns to date, all options are constituted using each Spirit’s emotions as the basis and the following three principles: ‘Regular Favorite’, ‘Opposition’, and ‘Dark Horse.[3]

“‘Dark Horse you say……”

The abrupt introduction of horse race terminologies baffled her. Encountering such a method of conveyance marked with overtones of the excessively wealthy, Kotori could not help but make a wry grin.

“Yes. If the trends were identical, there would be no purpose in creating options.”

“True, I won’t say that it’s incomprehensible, and having a rather uncertain choice does have its benefits…… but doesn’t this whole thing feel so disgusting?”

“There is no problem. Even if the first gamble is lost, we wager tenfold so as to procure enough capital back to ensure a profit.”

“I say, did some bastard exploit Maria’s calculation capabilities to predict the outcome of horse races!?”

This was definitely the result of learning some unnecessary information.

Kotori was at the brink of exploding with rage, shouting at the top of her lungs.

It seemed that a few crew members’ shoulders had slightly trembled; whether that was due to purely fearing their commander’s wrath or their secret conducts in the dark being exposed blatantly, this matter remained to be investigated in depth.

……Kotori vowed within herself to thoroughly inspect the management records.

In the course of time, the audio amplifier channeled a thudding sound from the earpiece being lightly knocked, indicating that Shidou was asking about the solution.

“Aah, sorry about that. It’s number 2, Shidou. I admit that leaving it to a professional wouldn’t be so bad, considering that she’s still an unsealed Spirit, having you deal with it personally would be the best option.”

Listening to her carefully, Shidou could be seen nodding in understanding as the scene was shown on the display screen.

“——Then, Mukuro, would you like to come to my house for a while? It just happens that there are combs and hairpins there.”

“Nushi-sama’s abode?”

Shidou had responded in accordance with Fraxinus’ directives, earning an unforeseen stare from Mukuro.

“Hueh. Riveting. Very well, all as Nushi-sama settles. Onwards we depart.”

“Haha…… I’m extremely honored.”

Shidou shrugged his shoulders, respectfully bowing his head. For some reason, he felt like a low servant or attendant when he was conversing with the quite anachronistically antiquated Mukuro.

“Hahahah, how now, Nushi-sama? Thine accentuation amuses.”

“……O-Ooh.”

Whether he had subconsciously modified his tone, Mukuro enquired with a face full of contentment. Shidou scratched his cheek while forcing a smile.

“Well then…… that’s that, but how will we get home…”

Shidou stood between two towering buildings as he spied upon the main road and pondered. Luckily, this was Tenguu City. About twenty minutes on foot was enough to reach Shidou’s house. However, strolling through the streets with a glamorously conspicuous girl increased the difficulty level many times over.

The boy was exasperated, only for Mukuro to tilt her head in awkwardness.

“Thine ire is but for naught. ‘Tis just a mere homecoming.”

“Um, even so……”

Shidou’s pronunciation did not falter. Mukuro then hung her hand over his shoulder, using her other hand to stab her staff into plain air, which sounded a click as it was twisted.

“<Michael>——<Unlock-Rātaibu>.”

In a split second, a *gate* fissured open, wide enough for one person to fit in at a time.

“Wha……”

Shidou was struck dumbfounded, yet Mukuro merely charged inside without hesitation. Afterwards, she protruded her hand outwards to wave at Shidou as if to hail him.

“H-Hey!”

“Shidou, just pursue her! The automatic surveillance camera will follow you in!

Kotori’s instructions were relayed through the earphone. Shidou scratched his head, girding up his loins to charge into the *gate*.

His view of the world blackened in an instant, and afterwards, the bedizened interior of the home he was so familiar with alongside Mukuro, who was throwing looks of curiosity everywhere with plentiful interest, fell into Shidou’s sight. At the same time he slipped through the *gate*, it started to noisily contract until it finally collapsed upon itself and dispersed into thin air.

“Hueh, dwell Nushi-sama hither? Bohemian in sooth.”

“Mukuro……”

“Un? Whereof?”

“……It’s nothing. To be frank, you were a great help. It’s just that, could you refrain from using your angel in public?”

Giving ear to Shidou, Mukuro glanced at him with momentary befuddlement, only to nod later with a ‘Well, very well,’ and return <Michael> to the void.

“Ergo, Nushi-sama. What for the nonce?”

“Ahh, come here for a moment.”

Shidou directed Mukuro to the mirror.

“Here, Mukuro. Sit down.”

“Hn.”

Mukuro obediently perched herself atop the round stool. Shidou then undid her Dango-style hair, fetched a comb, and groomed her golden hair with the utmost care.

“……Hueh.”

Precisely at that time, Mukuro’s body suddenly budged, causing Shidou to freeze his combing hand.

“Ah, sorry. Did that hurt?”

“A scant prickling. Take not to heart and recommence prithee.”

When Shidou questioned, Mukuro swayed her head as if wanting more.

Shidou, even reckoning that movement to be cute, wryly grinned and continued combing her hair.

“Then…… what kind of hairstyle would you like? I can tie it into a ponytail, or even twintails would suit you. Any request?”

“Hueh…… one shall suffice to stave off a mess.”

Shidou creased his brows as he sighed, styling Mukuro’s hair into the previous Dango-style once more. Before he had come to know of it, he believed that this hairstyle was an eccentric hallmark of Mukuro. Afterwards, Shidou plaited the remaining bundles of hair into three braids.

Although it was a complex task which entailed considerable mastery and expertise, for Shidou who had assisted Kotori in taking care of her hair countless times in the past, the assignment was a common routine and all in the day’s work. Not long after, Mukuro’s golden hair had been skillfully weaved into a charming ponytail.

“Hohoh! Beauteously effectuated!”

“I’m afraid that I don’t deserve such praise.”

Shidou bowed with respect, continuing with a ‘But.’

“Even though that may be so, the length hasn’t changed much. Is it still hard to walk with?”

“Fear not. Behold, Nushi-sama.”

Mukuro briefly replied, and then twirled her head around like a performer of song and dance. Her hair naturally followed the motion and twined around the back of her neck. So that’s how it was. The worrisome problem of its length was indeed extemporaneously solved now.

At this moment, light-hearted music came out of the earpiece in Shidou’s right ear.

“——Well done, Shidou. Her happiness level has successfully risen to a degree that makes her previous self’s readings seem inhuman. I guess the petty tricks won’t be needed anymore. Continue to conquer her with real tactics. Doing her hair is hard to come by, so how about going for a stroll in the streets?”

“Understood…… uh.”

Shidou responded in a low voice, sizing up Mukuro’s appearance simultaneously. ——A radiant Astral Dress depicting starry constellations;

Her attire would truly attract too much attention from onlookers.

“Ah…… That’s right. ——Kotori, I’ll be borrowing some of your clothes.”

“Eh? Ahh, what the heck. Go ahead.”

Kotori perceived Shidou’s intentions and gave the okay. After Shidou attentively chose a suitable piece of clothing from Kotori’s room, he went back to Mukuro’s side.

“Mukuro, we’ll be going outside for a walk after this, but your Astral Dress is too showy, so change into this instead——”

“Oh, all right.”

Mukuro retorted to Shidou’s voice, leaving the chair with a clap of her hands.

Instantaneously, the Astral Dress enrobing Mukuro’s body transformed into particles of light dissolving in mid-air, whereas the wearer’s snowy white naked body was flagrantly exposed. Since the clothes which had been fixing her breasts in place were liberated as well, they swung out like bulging water balloons.

“Wha…… M-Mukuro!?”

“Whereof is Nushi-sama abash’d? Wert we not bartering raiment? Deliver them hither.”

Mukuro had laid bare her nude body without the slightest effort to cover it up.

Her chest was exposed without any embarrassment. After receiving Kotori’s clothes from Shidou’s hands, she closely examined the clothes as if to confirm its structure before putting on the sleeves.

However.

"……Hueh?"

When she tried to fasten the blouse's buttons, Mukuro wrinkled her eyebrows.

It appeared that its size and measurement did not conform to her body.

"Nushi-sama, this garb is unbecoming. My chest aches."

"……"

As Mukuro stated with an anguished tone, the sound of silence could be heard being transmitted from the right earpiece. Despite a phrase such as 'the sound of silence' seeming rather unorthodox, if truth be told, that was exactly what it sounded like. For some unknown reason, it felt as if Kotori was currently right in the process of attempting to restrain a certain unspeakable emotion with all her might.

"No, like I said…… That isn't for you to literally wear. Aren't Spirits able to duplicate something with their spiritual power just by seeing them once?"

"Ooh, so it is."

Shidou turned back his body before Mukuro took off her clothes and placed them aside with another clap.

Mukuro's body then emitted a shining light which gradually formed the shape of clothing. With a swish, it became the same design as Kotori's——the dimensional aspect adjusted to fit Mukuro's proportions.

"Hn. Much at ease."

Mukuro was satisfied to the fullest, smiling cheerfully. Then, a disapproving voice resounded from the earphone.

"……Huh? Couldn't she have done so from the start? Why did she have to put it on? Huh?"

"A-Ahaha…… Well, anyway, let's go, Mukuro."

"Hn. Let us."

Shidou forced a smile while hastening to get going, whereas Mukuro straightforwardly assented with a nod.

Afterwards, she extended her hand with a 'Muu', which made her look like an

Ojou-sama who dreamed of her own personal assistant.

“That, this is……”

Shidou was at his wits’ ends for a moment, only to then courteously hold Mukuro’s hand like a refined butler.

“Shall we set out, Ojou-sama?”

“Hn, hehe.”

Mukuro was beaming with joy.

Being able to make her that happy was not so bad. So, Shidou joined hands with Mukuro, exited the Itsuka residence and forged ahead towards the main street.

◇◇◇

——Roughly six hours had elapsed ever since then. Shidou had brought Mukuro for a stroll through Tenguu City under the assistance of Ratatoskr.

The itinerary of the date was perfect. They had sauntered down many roads, entered any shop which caught their fancy, eaten a meal, and gone to an art gallery Mukuro considerably had a penchant for——that was the route.

Predilection-wise, Shidou figured out that Mukuro preferred quiet places to lively, bustling locations, Japanese cuisine to Western, and classical ornaments to modern accessories. When asked if she wanted anything in a jewelry store, to Shidou’s surprise, she pointed to an aureate fan on display in an antique house across the street. In spite of bearing the mien of a puerile child at first sight, her tastes were fairly unsophisticated and rustic.

And hence, the clock had struck seven in the night. The early dusk-befallen winter sun had faded out of the view from the street, and the dark curtains of evening had already obnubilated the horizon.

Shidou and Mukuro, who were feeling contented with the entirety of the date’s events, sat shoulder to shoulder in the comfort of the bench situated in a relatively deserted park. Mukuro flourished the previously acquired, gold- outlined fan as she blissfully hummed a tune.

“——Not bad. Within this one day, Mukuro has substantially opened the door of her heart to Shidou. He’s just a step from being able to seal her now. It’s ironic how much energy we spent before. ——Don’t slack and press on to the end.”

“A-Aah……”

Shidou glanced at the earnestly happy Mukuro, nodding his head with a bit of hesitation.

Kotori must have noticed his expression as she doubtfully questioned him.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing…… It’s just as you said. Mukuro’s very happy, and we can make the sealing a reality if her happiness level and mood keep rising like this…… but I’m just a little bothered.”

“By what?”

“Un…… Why Mukuro would lock her own heart and stay in space all alone…… By that.”

That very point was on his mind.

The present Mukuro was indeed filled with joy, and judging by Kotori’s words, her happiness level was steadily increasing by the moment. In fact, merely through their interaction today, not even a single mishap had occurred. One could say that Mukuro appeared to simply be a little angel among all Spirit types.

However, that was not the truth.

The reason as to why she had locked up her heart and soul was truly unfathomable.

It was a state of being unable to feel; incapable of believing; impuissant in thinking.

What could force her to sever every single tie she had to the world, to choose merely existing as a stone endlessly drifting throughout the cosmos?

Shidou could not help but postulate that there was more than what met the eye about Mukuro, a face of her he had never seen yet.

“That’s…… true. However, the important one isn’t the previous Mukuro, but the current one, right? There has never been a reason not to seal a Spirit’s power.”

“Ahh…… Alright.”

“——Hehehe.”

While he was having a discussion with Kotori, Mukuro’s laughter came from Shidou’s side all of a sudden.

“Now it is pronounced just as Nushi-sama foretold. To-day hath verily made Muku of good cheer.”

“Haha…… I’m just glad you like it.”

“Hueh. Gramercy, prolonging that void of mine heart would in sooth have barr’d Muku from relishing this flavor of life. Howbeit, reflecting back, to have plight’d thy troth for Muku, Nushi-sama——”

As she said so, Mukuro’s countenance became trenchant. Shidou even thought that his pique had been seen through, inclining his body backwards to shirk from her gaze.

“Eh? W-What’s the matter?”

“——Doth Nushi-sama love Muku?”

Then, Mukuro let out a mischievous smile while asking so, cute words which exceeded Shidou’s presumptions. Shidou could only chuckle an ‘Ahaha’.

“……Ahh, I love Mukuro, and I want to protect you.”

“Ehehe, thus, thus. Nushi-sama loves Muku. Ehehe.”

Mukuro concealed her mouth with her fan, rocking her legs as if her delight was unbearable.

She then leaned forwards, stared fixedly at Shidou’s face, and gently moved her cherry lips.

“——Muku likewise fancies Nushi-sama. Muku’s heart rests in thy favor, Shidou.”

“……! Ah, really……”

Shidou was forced to hold his breath. How was he to put it; despite possessing quite a little stature, her expression was unexpectedly bewitching.

“Thine answer is amendable. ……Enounce once more.”

“Eh? Aah——I-I love you, Mukuro.”

Shidou’s reply under Mukuro’s urging made her expose a well pleased smirk.

“Ehehe. Unbosoming till such a pitch supposes meritoriousness. ——Very well. Nushi-sama’s exhortation in the cosmos, Muku shall bear in mind.”

“Really!?”

“Un. Aye, in defiance of being overwrought at possessing not spirit power anymore…… To guerdon Nushi-sama for safeguarding Muku, parlous it is not.”

Mukuro wiggled her fingers as she declared so. Shidou felt as if the taut strings that constantly bound his heart in place had been slackened without warning.

Mukuro’s past was indeed one which made others want to descry. However, as Kotori had said, the present Mukuro was far more important. If she was willing to accept the sealing, that would produce the best result.

But when Shidou was just about to exhale a breath of relief, Mukuro resumed speaking happily.

“——One matter, though go it without saying? Vow’d thou, Nushi-sama, in the wake of bonding the contract with Muku, thou mustn’t chance on that concourse of past women evermore.”

“Aah, I unders——Eh?”

And alongside that surrounding ambience, right as he was readily nodding in reply…… Shidou slanted his head halfway through.

“Eh? W-Why?”

“What be so outré? Thus is but established. Loves Nushi-sama Muku not?

Muku loves Nushi-sama withal. If that be truth, Nushi-sama will with good grace do all for Muku. Nathless, should women of the more between us step, would that not be just so outré?”

Mukuro stated so with a most natural tone.

Rather, in reality, she herself thought that it was natural; and Shidou did not stay dumbstruck.

Yet such a way of thinking, if rephrased, would turn out to be no different from a

matrimonial relationship——for the Shidou whose duty was to seal the power of any Spirit manifesting in the world, it was a fatal blow.

“Hm? Hath Muku spoken any impropriety?”

“……No, about that, what I mean to say is……”

Being stared down by those crystal clear eyes of Mukuro, Shidou had to stagger his sight. There would have been no other way around this given the fact that solely Shidou wielded the ability to seal Spirits’ power. In other words, this also engraved in Shidou an enormous sense of irresponsibility towards the Spirits.

“Wait, Shidou, what did you get argued into?”

“I-I’m sorry…… My conscience suffered a bit of condemnation.”

“Do things of that sort later. ——The point is, there’s no way you can undertake something like this. Even if you lie to her and go on with the sealing, things will take a turn for the worse if she finds out…… Explain to her nicely that sealing is an entirely different matter from marriage. We’ll just have to go with this route.”

“……That’s true.”

Shidou gave a slight nod and gradually regulated his respiration, confronting Mukuro afresh.

“Um, Mukuro. Listen to me carefully. I’m unable to fulfil that request.”

“Mnn? Art thou a traitor to my love?”

“……”

“Don’t feel insulted by a simple remark.”

Kotori reprimanded her helpless brother. In order to rouse his cheer, Shidou coughed a couple of times to clear his throat before continuing.

“Like I said before, me, I want to save every Spirit. So…… if another Spirit like you appears in the future, I must seal her. And——all the Spirits I’ve sealed until now, I love them as much as I love you, Mukuro. I’ll be really glad if you can get along with them.”

“……Hueh.”

Hearing Shidou’s heartfelt words, Mukuro was at a loss for a while.

After many seconds passed, she clapped her hands together as if something struck her mind.

“Thus, so that be thy plight. Nushi-sama is truly benign.”

“Eh?”

Incapable of fully comprehending the significance of Mukuro’s statement, Shidou widened his eyes. However, Mukuro merely bowed her head as though she had a good grasp of the boy’s predicament.

“Muku envisages. Nushi-sama need not utter another vocable. Entrusting all to Muku will suffice.”

Mukuro finished and got up from the park bench, folding the elegantly- decorated aureate fan and propping it against her chin.

“——Well then, we shall draw our evening to a close hither. Let us convene again, Nushi-sama.”

Leaving behind this series of words, Mukuro stepped forwards into the dim path.

“Wait, Mukuro!?”

Shidou tried to run after her helter-skelter, but to no avail as Mukuro must have utilized <Michael> in route, her petite silhouette having already receded from view.

“Really…… What is she planning?”

Treading across the pavement illuminated by dusky streetlights and blithely unaware of the ulterior meaning behind Mukuro’s words, Shidou’s face became painted with a blurry shade of uncertainty.

Chapter 8 - The Locked Memories

“——Hn, hn, hmmn, hn~.”

A figure stood amidst the pitch-black darkness. No——to be precise, amidst a sea of stars.

Hoshimiya Mukuro slowly drifted, her long hair dancing with glimmers of shining light and elegant grace.

Overhead was the limitless stygian cosmos. Under her eyes’ gaze was an azure celestial body of astronomical proportions.

That’s correct. After she had bid farewell to Shidou, Mukuro opened a *gate* in mid-air using <Michael> and once again teleported back to the wasteland known as space.

Be that as it may, this did not by any means indicate that she had lost interest in Shidou and the surface. It would be better to say that the place they spent their stroll together was especially wonderful. However——if one needed to ponder over matters, the noiseless cosmos would triumph as the superior choice.

“Howbeit——”

Mukuro murmured to herself, aiming a glance at the planet beneath.

“What a goodly clime. Oft espied, yet remorse none——Muku is truly prodigal.”

On that day, Mukuro’s bosom was impaled with Shidou’s pseudo-<Michael>.

“Hehe, Shidou is well deserving of Muku’s gratitude.”

She then angled her body backwards, stretching her limbs and body.

Exercise made one’s mind entirely free from worry. Not only that, but the scenery, respiration, and sunlight——after subsequently abstaining from external stimulus for a long period, it felt like someone had just struck her.

Only this was——

"……Hueh?"

At that instant, Mukuro tilted her head.

Meticulously deliberating, it was a given that this world was blessed with such many things of splendor, so why had she sealed off her own heart?

"Mmm……?"

Mukuro joined her hands and feet together, leisurely rotating there while reminiscing. But no matter how much effort she put into it, nothing came up.

At last, she gave up in futility and heaved a sigh.

"Well, no matter."

Right, more importantly——there were more pressing affairs which required to be dealt with sooner.

Shidou. Itsuka Shidou. The man who unlatched the lock on Mukuro's heart and introduced her to this gorgeous, multicolored world.

And of greatest importance——he is her lover and likewise she is his.

"Mn, hn, merry indeed. To have one's beloved swain in else loved, thus never struck as merriment in days gone by."

Simply by the thought of Shidou, her maiden heart gently fluttered with ebullient, exhilarated happiness. So this feeling was what Shidou had spoken of before.

However, there was one more hurdle to cross.

Mukuro's infatuated crush was utterly too tender, too kind-hearted.

"Woe betide Muku if naught be effectuated."

She smiled sweetly, though a little overly, and fished out from within the void a massive key—<Michael>.

◇◇◇

——Everyday was filled with joy to the brim.

After I woke up in the morning, Father, Mother, and Ane-sama would say good morning to me.[1]

Back then, I did not know how lovely it was to have my family members by my side whenever I woke up.

Let alone how blissful it was to simply eat our breakfast together.

Yet above all that, there was one thing worth more joy.

Ane-sama would tie my hair for me.

"——'s hair is so pretty!"

She had a habit of saying that a lot while combing my hair.

Being complimented by my beloved sister, I was overjoyed and proud. I always looked forward to this time of the day with all I could.

Before I realized, Ane-sama's fingertips had laced my hair into dangos. Within mere minutes, the muddleheaded cat just arisen from slumber had turned into a delightful young girl. When I had first experienced such a sensation, I even believed my sister to be a magician.

After telling her my impressions in a happy-go-lucky tone, she looked fairly startled, only to smile from ear to ear——petting my head once again with a gentleness that plucked the strings of my heart.

Following this, we would eat the delicious breakfast which Mother made for us and then head for school after an exchange of greetings.

"We're off!"

"Take care!"

Once we reached home, Mother would come and welcome us without fail.

"Welcome back."

Watching the skies together on the roof with my star-loving sister after having dinner was something I ensured to do every night.

During the scorching summertime, we would lay out a plastic board for the both of

us to lie on and look up at the starlit sky.

Ane-sama would point at each of the glittering speckles in the sky one by one, mentioning the names of those stars as well as their origins to me.

Even though my childhood self could not quite understand her, I took pleasure in seeing Ane-sama enthusiastically explaining those seemingly unreachable concepts to me, so I would usually return to the roof of the house by the time evening arrived.

Not long after drowsiness assaulted and my consciousness dimmed, Ane- sama would for sure force a grin as if in apology and fondly caress my hair.

“Sorry for getting carried away.”

I liked falling asleep so peacefully, enveloped by such warmth.

In what felt like an instant, I woke up——a new day was beginning.

Living this common, incomparable life was blissful and irresistible for me.

Greeting Father, Mother, and Ane-sama again gave me immeasurable joy.

My family that belonged to only me, a space mine alone, there were people who loved me and people that I loved.

Times as happy as those, my childhood self would always think that they could go on forever.

Nevertheless, the day that world came to an end came much faster than expected.

Nothing drastic occurred. It was neither an unfortunate accident which sent everyone to another world, nor a divorce that caused the family to fall into pieces. It wasn’t even the appearance of blood relatives who revoked from them the rights to my custody.

——That day.

I eagerly waited for that day. After all, Ane-sama had promised to take me to Tenguu Tower.

However, that day, she had also brought along friends from school.

That’s correct. Just like that.

There was no other noteworthy thing, just another page of everyday life.

But it was unacceptable for myself.

That's because Ane-sama belonged to only me.

Ane-sama should love only me. She should love only me.

Yet this sister, unbeknownst to me, was having fun with a friend I did not know of. That person was intruding in the world between only my sister and me.

This thought alone wrenched my heart. It was grueling. It was unbearable.

But I could not do anything.

I tried my best to endure, to withstand it and enjoy the day like everyone else.

However, when I was looking into the distant landscape from the observation tower, Ane-sama's friend spoke to me.

"Ne, ——-chan, your hair is really long. Wouldn't it be better to make it a little shorter? Ne, ——, don't you think so too?"

Then, my sister, being sought for acquiescence, thought awhile before turning towards me and said:

"Un…… That's right. Isn't it a little long? Should we go shorten it some other time?"

——It was not as if both of them harbored any ill will.

Ane-sama and her friend merely noticed that my lengthy hair tended to rock to and fro whenever I walked, so they just suggested so.

But the impact those words lashed to my heart was one which gripped onto it and threatened to crumble it. I ran away from Tenguu Tower as if my life depended on it.

——I was helpless at my suffering.

Ane-sama had said that it was pretty.

Ane-sama had said that she liked it.

A simple remark from her friend had changed Ane-sama.

In other words, she valued that person more than she valued me. If Ane- sama

found herself in a situation where she had to choose between her friend and me, she would choose that person without a doubt.

Such notions were similar to ink staining my attire, spreading at a rapid, uncatchable rate.

I had always taken for granted that Father, Mother, and Ane-sama loved me the most.

But those three people, prior to my appearance, had always lived in this world——each of them keeping interpersonal relationships secret from me.

Father, Mother, Ane-sama all had, unbeknownst to me, fraternized with people unfamiliar to me, and rubbed shoulders with strangers.

“Ugh…… Ah……”

Once I barely came up against this cruel fact, a sick, vomiting feeling surged up my chest.

My heart, having known to love and be loved, understood at last that this emotion was sorrow.

Then, that time——

◇◇◇

“……huh.”

A night had passed since the date with Mukuro.

Shidou had woken up earlier than usual.

It was not like he had something peculiar to attend to or he had been stirred awake by an alarm clock. Last night, being plagued by the words Mukuro left behind at her departure, Shidou had been unable to get a good night’s sleep.

On top of that, he had a terrible nightmare.

Of the events which occurred after dropping from the sky that day, it was a truly grievous dream; a lifelike vision retelling what had once happened to him in such

vivid detail.

Though in the end, what Shidou had obtained in his new home was not an older sister, but a cute little sister.

"……Hm——"

The lack of sleep had proved to be detrimental for the condition of Shidou's body. Even so, falling asleep right after waking up was quite demanding.

Either way, if he could not sleep anymore, beginning preparations for breakfast would be the best course of action. Shidou glimpsed at the clock to confirm what time it was before emitted a long yawn and crawled upright from the bed.

Treading drawn-out steps as he descended to the first floor, Shidou washed his face and prepared a change of clothes, slipping into his combat uniform for men afterwards——the apron-adorned Shidou proficiently cooked breakfast.

Then, unaware of the passage of time, right when the savory fragrance of the fish he was frying had spread out, Shidou heard the sounds of footsteps coming from the second floor.

It appeared that Kotori had risen from her slumber. She had been managing Mukuro's search and surveillance data last night, continuing her work at Fraxinus till very late into the evening. The fatigue still lingering in her body should have exceeded that of what he felt.

Kotori rubbed her eyes while slowly limping down the stairs like a zombie.

Shidou forced a grin, waving his hand to greet her.

"G-Good morning, Kotori."

"Un…… morning's good……"

Suddenly.

Just as she finished her line, Kotori seemed to have noticed something, abruptly opening her eyes wide——

"Kyaaaaaaaaaaa!?"

An epic cry came out of her mouth.

"……! W-What's wrong……!?"

Shidou could not help but plug his ears with his hands, shooting a confused look at his sister.

“What is it, Kotori, did something happen?”

However, as though refusing to even answer him, Kotori stared at Shidou with a sharp gaze.

Then, she uttered an emotional voice of warning.

“Who the hell are you? Why are you in my house!?”

That statement excessively exceeded his expectations.

“……Hah?”

Shidou’s eyes were shrunk into two tiny dots.

Yet that was only natural, as such a question naturally puzzled him. Why he was in her house; such a query robbed him of words. No matter what, Shidou had lived in that house for more than a decade. Even if they were not related by blood, they were still brother and sister.

“……Guh, what are you saying, Kotori?”

Shidou scratched his face and attempted to approach her, only to elicit a yell from the girl as if to ward him off afterwards.

“Don’t come near me! I’m calling the police!”

“Eh……”

Dumbfounded, Shidou wiped off the sweat forming on his forehead.

What was Kotori doing; this was going overboard for a mere joke. In other words ——

Right when he was cudgeling his brains, Kotori grabbed a random ornament from nearby anxiously.

“You…… what are you standing there in a daze for! I told you to get the hell…… out of here already!”

“Uwah!?”

Kotori hurled the ornament in her hand towards him without mercy. Shidou

hurriedly moved his body away to avoid the attack.

“H-Hey, that’s dangerous——”

“Shut up! Get lost!”

Kotori shrieked in a fit of hysteria, snatching another projectile to throw.

Although he was clueless as to Kotori’s actions, Shidou knew that his words would be incapable of properly reaching her. In a flurry, he took his bag and jacket, fleeing the place.

“Guh, hya!”

“Ahh! Hey, freeze!”

Previously ordering him to get out of her sight, now she was forbidding him from running away. That being said now was not the time to point out such an occasion in a carefree manner. Shidou laid hold of the shoes sitting idle on the porch, dashing out the house with bare feet.

“Hah…… Hah…… Hah……”

After sprinting for some time and confirming the absence of any pursuit by Kotori, Shidou could finally exhale a deep breath of relief. As he stabilized his breathing and took off his apron, Shidou succeeded in putting on his school uniform.

“Really…… This is uncalled for even if she couldn’t get any sleep. Your brother’s going to cry!”

Shidou rubbed his face as he spoke to himself, walking along his current route.

It was the first month of the New Year. To tell the truth, wearing only a jacket made him feel like dying from the cold. If the conditions would allow, Shidou wanted to return home for the time being and bring along his winter clothes to protect him against the weather.

Even so, since there was still the possibility of Kotori going berserk, not heading towards the Itsuka residence for the moment was the better choice.

Granted that she would not call the local police, her fits of anger would probably invoke a few rumors and slanders in the neighborhood.

Other people’s digressing gossip would last for 75 days, but for the present Shidou, he was trapped in a vicious circle doomed to have it evolved into another

rumor before that period ended. He hoped to avert the spread of any wicked criticism as much as possible, “I guess I can’t do anything…… might as well go to school for now.”

Shidou said his utterances of abandonment, suffering the bone-chilling winds while shivering as he trudged on the road to school.

Then, after several sneezes and walking for a few minutes, Shidou arrived at Raizen High School at last.

Shidou slipped out of his shoes and replaced them with his indoor ones.

Marching towards his classroom, he placed his bag on top of his table with movements he was accustomed to, and then pulled his chair out before taking a seat.

“……Hm?”

Inhaling a big breath within the warm room, Shidou felt a subtle premonition that something was amiss.

To put it bluntly, it was as if he had entered a wrong classroom by mistake.

His classmates in the room were time and again darting looks of incomprehension in his direction, even discussing among themselves.

“What’s the matter……?”

Shidou slanted his head, scanning his attire to see if something was wrong, whether he was until now dressed in his pajama trousers due to leaving the house in a rush, or his shoes were put on in reverse.

Yet as he double checked himself, no portion of his accoutrements were out of place. Just in case, Shidou touched his hair, only to find that there was no sign of it being disheveled owing to sleep.

“Hm……”

Could it be that, in this frigid climate, not donning an overcoat and making one’s way to school while trembling was an uncommon practice? Shidou drew up on such a conclusion for the time being, fishing out his stationery and notebook from his bag.

“Ho~Hoho~Hohoho! Hukehkehkeh……”

As such, snorting a series of weird nasal sounds, a boy who styled his hair with pomade entered the classroom. ——He was one of Shidou's rather iniquitous friends: Tonomachi Hiroto.

"Ooh, Tonomachi."

"Hm? Aah, morning, fellow classmate."

Shidou stood up and called out his name, and Tonomachi replied with his consistently frivolous manner of speaking.

However.

"Long time no see, huh? I wonder how long it's been…… Ah, forgive me, I presumptuously addressed you. Sorry, but who are you again?"

The expression on Tonomachi's face grew more and more anxious as he spoke until he lowered his head in apology. Shidou was stark speechless, broadening both his eyes.

"Hah?"

"Yah, I'm really sorry about this. ……Ah, did we meet each other in karaoke previously? There were so many people that time so I couldn't remember—."

"……No no no, what are you saying, Tonomachi? It's me, Itsuka Shidou.

Haven't we always been classmates?"

Shidou furrowed his brows, but it was now Tonomachi's turn to display a perplexed expression.

"Classmates……? From?"

"Tonomachi……?"

Seeing his friend's response, Shidou once again creased his eyebrows.

Certainly, Tonomachi had sometimes cracked jokes which nobody was able to figure out in the past, but his current appearance gave off an impression entirely different in comparison to the past. To say it bluntly, it was as if he had genuinely forgotten about Shidou.

If Tonomachi's acting skills had dramatically skyrocketed without Shidou knowing, that would have meant……

Shidou looked at his surroundings, calling out to his other classmates inside the room.

“Um, Yamabuki, Hazakura, Fujibakama.”

“Haeh?”

“Hueh?”

“Hoeh?”

Reacting to Shidou’s voice, the three girls who were chatting nearby then lifted their heads in an organized manner——a tall and lanky girl wearing a purposely tattered school uniform, a girl of medium stature whose particular distinction was having none at all, along with a spectacles-wearing petite girl.

They were the renowned Ai, Mai, and Mii trio of class 2-4.

“Tonomachi’s still talking nonsense…… You three recognize me, right?”

After Shidou asked so, the trio glanced at each other back and forth with looks of dubiety.

“……Ugh, who’s he?”

“Uwah, is he hitting on us? So lame——”

“Has spring come already——Who are you targeting? Who?”

Ai, Mai, and Mii suddenly stood up, making quite the uproar.

But on the contrary, all color faded from Shidou’s now pale face.

“You don’t…… know me……?”

Emitting a dried-up, withered voice, Shidou vacantly surveyed his vicinity. Yet to no avail, as there was not a single person begging to differ from Tonomachi and the Ai, Mai, and Mii trio. Not only that, but the students also shot at him glimpses of utter shock.

This was obviously an abnormal situation he had found himself in. Was Shidou yet to awaken from a dream, or were all his fellow classmates playing a joke on him…… Even so, they would not have done that without any explanation. Shidou felt as if he had got lost in a place he had been extremely familiar with.

Then——

“Hoho, good morning everyone!”

“Good morning.”

While Shidou was being confined in a prison of confusion, two young girls entered the classroom. ——They were Tohka and Origami.

“……!”

Shidou just identified their figures and rushed towards them, planning to seek help from the two.

“N-Ne! Tohka, Origami!”

“Hoho!? W-What are you doing all of a sudden? Don’t scare me like that.”

“……”

Tohka seemed to be rather startled, whereas Origami preserved her original composure as she turned towards Shidou.

“A-Aah…… Sorry. But hear me out, you two. Everyone in class is acting weird. No…… not just that. Did Kotori also sleep herself silly——”

“Muu……?”

Even though Shidou was venting his grievances, Tohka wrinkled her eyebrows with a confounded expression instead.

Such a reaction made him feel an illusion as though his heart was being forcibly plucked out.

Shidou’s pulse began to palpitate faster and fiercer as more of his suspicions were proven true. Cold sweat was beading atop the skin of his whole body. A sensation similar to dizziness invaded his body from head to toe, threatening to overwhelm the boy there and then. A terrible prognostication flooded Shidou’s mind.

However, Tohka and Origami did not perceive his present predicament and merely resumed their speech without any hint of concern.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t understand what you’re saying……”

“Who are you specifically?”

“——”

Both of them vociferated such callous, hard-bitten words.

Shidou could only dully stand there from beginning to end.

◇◇◇

It was now an hour past noon. The sun, which should have climbed to the summit a long time ago, was enshrouded by a thick layer of clouds, preventing any rays of light from being able to heat the ground.

The gusting chilly winds deprived Shidou of his body temperature little by little. He let out a large yawn, sniffed a couple of times through his nose, and brushed his shoulders.

Shidou was presently not in a classroom of Raizen High School, but outside a certain apartment complex next to the Itsuka residence——to be precise, he was situated in a position across the road where he could clearly see the building. He concealed his body from view behind an electricity pole, observing the block of flats with care.

“……!”

Without being aware of how long Shidou had loitered, the doors to the apartment were flung open, and two delicate girls exited. One of them was a docile girl who wore a cute hat on her head. She was adorned in a bloated overcoat and had a rabbit puppet mounted on her left hand. The other was dressed in plain clothes and had a muffler wrapped around her neck. This girl seemed to be in a rather unpleasant mood from her expression. ——They were Spirits who lived in that mansion, Yoshino and Natsumi.

“……Uah, I’m freezing to death. My breath’s so white.”

“Fuuu…… it’s true. Ha——”

“Hihi—! <White Breath>!”

In response to Natsumi’s words, Yoshino exhaled rimy white puffs of air, and, bearing this, the bunny puppet Yoshinon twisted its body. Yoshino giggled happily.

But in contrast, Natsumi's expression seemed more difficult to understand…

Rather, it would be better to say that she was knitting her brows out of discomfort.

"……Um, Yoshino? You didn't have to come with me to buy stuff, you know?

It's not really a big deal, and if you were to catch a cold……"

"That won't happen, don't worry. I can put up with this cold pretty well. And—

—"

Yoshino declared so as she took hold of Natsumi's hand, squeezing it into the pouch on her clothes.

"Hya?"

Possibly due to being startled by Yoshino's sudden action, Natsumi yelled in surprise.

Yoshino slightly blushed before timidly stating.

"Eh…… it's warmer this way."

"Um…… yeah……"

Natsumi hummed and hawed, her face was comparatively a hundredfold more flustered than Yoshino's expression. Whether it was because the quantity of perspiration increased or otherwise, Natsumi loosened her scarf a bit with her free hand to let the breeze blow against her neck.

"……Haha."

Watching the scene capable of bringing a smile to anyone's face many times, Shidou could only unwind the corners of his lips.

But Shidou immediately reminded himself. That's right. Now was not the time to merely spy from afar.

He pulled himself together by bracing his face, dashed from behind the electrical pole and leaped before the couple of girls.

Then, he curbed the pestering unease in his heart and shouted.

"Yoshino, Natsumi! And Yoshinon!"

“Eh……?”

“W-What is it all of a sudden……”

“Uwaha—! You scared the daylights out of me—!”

Towards Shidou’s abrupt appearance, the two exposed astonished expressions. Shidou took in a deep breath and continued.

“About that, you two, do you still remember me?”

He clenched his fist and asked so in earnest. However——

“Uh, that…… Sorry, but I don’t know who you are.”

“……Me neither. Let’s go, Yoshino, Yoshinon.”

“Aha— sorry about that little boy, find someone else to ask, won’t you?”

The result was as stated. After Yoshino and Natsumi had shown their incredulity, both of them quickened their pace as they brushed past Shidou.

“Ah……”

Shidou could not even extend his hands towards them, only managing to fall onto his knees on the spot, motionless.

“This must be some joke…… what’s with this……”

Dumbfounded, he forced out those words.

After realizing that Tohka and Origami were complete strangers to him, unknown dismay and helplessness had assailed Shidou’s entire body as he rushed about in order to question the other Spirits if they still remembered who he was.

Kaguya and Yuzuru from the neighboring class 2-3 had paralleled Tohka’s shocked expression. Nia, who lived in a high-level apartment within the city, had regarded Shidou as an impolite fan and slammed the door in his face—

—On the other hand, Miku, once hearing his voice, had screamed, “Kyaaaaaa!? Some strange guy called ahhhhh!?” No further contact could be established afterwards.

Having tried what he could, with the last ounce of his remaining hope, Shidou came to look for Yoshino and Natsumi…… yet the outcome was no different from

the others.

Shidou feebly scratched his hair.

Nothing had changed compared to yesterday. Everything was as it was supposed to be. The views Shidou saw were no different from those in his memories.

Except one thing. ——The Spirits alongside his friends, everyone had forgotten all about Shidou. This single aspect instigated in him a certain sense of bewilderment as though he had been tossed into a parallel world.

“Damn…… ‘Don’t know me’. What’s with this!? Someone, anyone, does anyone recognize me……?”

Shidou supported his forehead with his hands as he contemplated like his life depended on it. However, the only ones left were the worst Spirit, Tokisaki Kurumi, whose whereabouts were currently unknown; Shidou’s enemies, DEM’s Westcott and Ellen; along with the Spirit who had vanished right in front of Shidou without leaving any tracks——

“————”

In that instant.

Shidou held his breath slightly.

He uttered with his trembling lips the name that surfaced within his mind.

“Mu…kuro……”

Exactly. Mukuro. Hoshimiya Mukuro. The Spirit who possessed the key- shaped angel <Michael> that is capable of sealing almost anything in existence.

Her powers exceeded that which the naked eye could discern by far. As a matter of fact, Mukuro had used this ability to seal off her own heart.

That was the reason Shidou had called out her name, not because of the possibility that she might still have him in her memory.

“Muku envisages. Nushi-sama need not utter another vocable. Entrusting all to Muku will suffice.”

The sentences she had left behind when they were about to part yesterday reverberated inside the depths of Shidou’s consciousness.

That time, Shidou had been unaware of the meaning lying behind those words, and now the irregular phenomenon which had befallen him perfectly interlocked with that excerpt in his mind.

Merely by placing an invisible lock on the heart, the angel <Michael>, in the shape of a key, could seal the target's emotions.

Shidou wondered if this ability extended to even meddling with a person's memories.

"Could… all this be your doing, Mukuro……!?"

Shidou pressed his mouth, his expression gradually being infiltrated by a shudder.

Of course, this was just a conjecture. There was neither concrete evidence nor a founded basis to his speculation; it was simply a guess within the scope of Shidou's imagination.

However, such abnormal circumstances would not have occurred out of the blue. If one had to consider that there was a Spirit pulling the strings from the shadows, Mukuro's name would without a doubt be mentioned.

"……"

Shidou silently lifted his head. He stretched his hand towards the wall, setting his body upright and sighing in a low whisper.

Indeed, Shidou found himself in a labyrinthine situation, as if he had lost his way. Despite wanting to consult his grievances with someone, he could only discover that the worst case scenario had betided him such that no one remembered him. In reality, he was at a dead end.

However, within his mind sprung up a hypothesis that allowed him to regain his resolve.

Needless to say, Mukuro's capabilities were overwhelming. Yet being cast aside into this entirely foreign oddity all alone was worlds apart from being able to infer roughly who the culprit that precipitated it was.

That's right. If Mukuro had undoubtedly locked up everyone's memories with <Michael>'s power——

"——<Haniel>!"

Shidou did a quick scan of his surroundings to ascertain that there were no

bystanders and, with closed eyes, yelled out the name of an angel afterwards.

In concert with his summoning, an angel in the form of a broom manifested in front his hand. Shidou swiftly inhaled a breath, mustered courage, and once again verbalized.

“<Kaleidoscope>……!”

As though responding to Shidou’s voice, <Haniel> emitted a pale silver light, its appearance ceaselessly morphing like clay.

After a few seconds elapsed, a huge key-shaped staff materialized there.

Correct. Shidou had in the past duplicated <Michael> and, with it, unlocked Mukuro’s previously sealed heart and soul.

An angel answers to its host’s wishes. If the Spirits’ forgetting about Shidou was a ramification of <Michael>, would identically unlocking their memories carry the same effect?

——However.

“Eh……?”

As Shidou maintained the posture of holding <Michael>, his entire body froze and became inflexible, letting out a brusque voice.

Nonetheless, it was to be expected.

Right on the side of the pseudo-<Michael> gripped in his hands, a miniature gate began to take shape as the front tip of a huge key appeared through there, piercing the fake <Michael>.

“T-This is——”

“——<Lock- Segva>!”

Shidou widened his eyes in astonishment. Then, a sound which he felt as though he had heard it somewhere reverberated, and, with a clank, the huge key retracted within.

In the blink of an eye, the pseudo-<Michael> Shidou had been holding discharged gently. It began undulating radiance as it turned back into its original form, <Haniel> before finally dispersing into particles of light fading into nothingness.

“Ah——”

Shidou stared at his now empty hands with broadened eyes.

Afterwards, he threw his line of sight towards the front tip of the key floating in mid-air, issuing a quivering voice.

“Mi-<Michael>……”

As if responding to his voice, the ‘gate’ that had ruptured the space started to expand gradually——

Following closely, a girl flew out from inside the rift.

With hair blonde as the Golden Fleece coiling around her neck and adorned in clothing of a design identical to that of Kotori, she was a young girl of a small stature.

——Hoshimiya Mukuro had appeared.

“Mukuro……”

“Muahaha, an expedient fitting of someone as prestigious as Nushi-sama, by whom Muku’s heart was unfasten’d. Tis worthy of thy name, Nushi-sama.”

The girl exposed a slight smirk. Shidou could only reflect on her words as he shuddered.

To put it briefly, Mukuro had accounted for the possibility of Shidou transforming <Haniel> into <Michael> and making a move to unlock everyone's recollections.

And at that moment in time, she had sealed the powers of his false <Michael> with the genuine one.

There was no need to think of the reason. ——It was to seal off the released powers Shidou possessed so as not to let him open anew the lock on the other Spirits’ memories.

Mukuro’s statements and deeds had perfectly verified Shidou’s hypothesis.

“Mukuro…… So you’re the one who altered everyone's memories!”

“Hm, verily. Sterling, ay?”

Mukuro proudly stood with arms akimbo, causing Shidou to furrow his brows and

shout.

“Why! Why did you do something like that!?”

“Wherefore? Hueh. What an aberrant enquiry in sooth.”

Her face said everything about her unawareness as a carefree smile emerged on it.

“With thus, Muku and Nushi-sama can sequester ourselves with each other.

Nushi-sama need not brood further. Loving but Muku unescorted by surfeiting cupidity shall suffice in that stead.”

“Wha……!?”

Shidou was dumbstruck, unable to even breathe.

The utterances of the girl before his eyes and the adorable guise on her face created a prominent, unequivocal incongruity, throwing Shidou into disorder instantly.

Shidou was a man who had sealed many Spirits in the past as well. To this day, he had been met with numerous bitter crises and complex relationships, having even experienced the formidable and terrifying malice of enemies.

But——this time was different.

The girl in front of him was a completely dissimilar being compared to the Spirits and people he had ever encountered until now.

The worst Spirit, Tokisaki Kurumi, evoked fear in the hearts of people. In the face of her unending bloodlust and vanity, Shidou could only remain paralyzed.

Similarly, when confronted with DEM Industries’ Westcott and Ellen, Shidou felt a sense of dread too. Before the inhuman, overwhelming animosity, Shidou was petrified in place.

However, Mukuro possessed neither bloodthirst nor ill will.

From the looks of her expression——it was pure, unadulterated benevolence; and love.

“Lo, Nushi-sama.”

Mukuro revealed a poised grin, her lips then beginning to move.

“Dost thou adore Muku?”

She spoke with excessively cute, yet also innocent words.

But Shidou was at a loss for words of any kind.

◇◇◇

“A-Angh! It’s really been a while, everyoneeee! Ever since we parted, I couldn’t stop thinking about everyoneeeeee!”

It was around noon on a rest day. Tap tap tap tap…… Just as the pattering of footsteps in the corridor had resounded, the greeting had already reverberated in advance. Miku soared into the living room of the Itsuka residence.

“Ugh——”

Her appearance in the scene sent a shudder down Natsumi’s spine, catapulting the elvish girl off the sofa as she scurried to pinpoint a concealed cache.

To Natsumi’s chagrin, however, her speedy maneuvers were ferreted out by Miku, who, like a cat locked onto a mouse, pounced on her.

“Yaa!”

“Kyaa!”

Being embraced with such intense passion from Miku, alongside her fervent statements, Natsumi frantically struggled in her grip.

Watching the situation, the owner of the house, Kotori, let out a sigh.

“What am I going to do with you, always making a noisy racket? Speaking of parting, didn’t we see each other just yesterday?”

“Fu fu, stress dihkrishing haha houhohohoho…ah nutrients.”

“……I haven’t the slightest idea of what you’re saying. Get your face off Natsumi’s belly first, and then speak.”

Kotori batted half a glance at her. Miku contentedly lifted her head with a ‘Pfha!’

“Recharge complete——! Today’s tiredness has been driven away——!”

Perhaps it was a figment of the imagination, but Miku’s skin seemed smoother than before. On the other hand, Natsumi, whose midriff had been marked by a sizeable hickey, thoroughly escaped. How horrifying! A vampire had unexpectedly emerged in the residential area of Tenguu City!

Kotori could only shrug her shoulders as she turned her sights to the living room.

The Spirits currently gathered inside the living room of the Itsuka Residence.

Tohka and Origami sat on the couch, whereas the Yamai sisters were engrossed in playing video games on the television. Yoshino was hugging the lethargic and traumatized Natsumi, whose vitality had been completely drained by Miku. The

dining table was occupied by Nia, who was scratching her head as she stared at a white notebook. It looked like she was racking her brains about the script of a manga.

Although there was no special occasion for everyone to meet up, perchance they were just feeling merry, so everyone naturally convened at that house.

Then, a fortissimo sound could be heard coming from the television. It would seem that the outcome of the battle between the Yamai twins had just been determined. Kaguya clung to her head as Yuzuru proudly puffed out her chest.

“Ah——! Almost——! There!? Ah——!”

“Victory. Despite the slight danger, this is Yuzuru’s win. The side dishes for lunch are now mine.”

“Uguh!”

It appeared that they had a wager. Kaguya slammed the floor in dissatisfaction. Kotori heaved a sigh once again.

“I’m not against your competition, but keep in mind to maintain a balanced diet.”

After finishing speaking, Kotori glimpsed at the clock. Twelve o’clock. Like the both of them had said, the time for lunch had come to pass.

“……Hm?”

A nonplussed sensation brewed within her as she thought of that. Habitually in the past, food was supposed to have been plentifully arranged on the dining table…… But today, any preparations for lunch had not even begun yet.

“A-ré? That’s strange, how did I…… Uh, by the way, was I supposed to be making food?”

A certain incomprehension made Kotori furrow her eyebrows. At that moment, Yoshino bobbed her head out from behind Natsumi, gazing at Kotori with worry.

“What’s the matter, Kotori-san?”

“Eh? Ah, it’s…… nothing. I was just getting hungry, so let’s have some pizza today.”

Intending to get by perfunctorily, Kotori uttered so, only for the Yamai sisters to be electrified with excitement all of a sudden.

“Truly!? Then I shall hope for a grand banquet of half dead poultry!”

“Explanation. Kaguya wishes to eat a roast chicken pizza.”

“Exactly that! Fufu——and pizza possesses no side dish——! What a pity, Yuzuru!”

“Negation. The authority over side dishes is still in effect. Exchange Kaguya’s pizza toppings with Yuzuru’s pizza crust.”

“Pizza crust!?”

“Mercy. Here is some pity: You are given not crisp and brittle pieces, but bread with a soft texture.”

Yuzuru consoled with a fake tender voice, triggering Kaguya to shriek.

“You’re not human——!”

“Obviously. I am a Spirit.”

Well, Yuzuru, after observing Kaguya’s depressed manner, would have gladly rescinded their gamble and let her eat her pizza’s palatable parts. Kotori shrugged once more, reaching for the phone to order takeout.

“……?”

In that instant, an impression as if something was out of place surged through her as she looked towards the sofa where Tohka was currently seated.

Be that as it may, Tohka did not do anything, merely hugging her arms with an intricate expression painted on her face.

However, that was the very reason it was unusual. ——That’s right. There had undoubtedly been talks of putting an order for pizza, yet Tohka, let alone placing a request, had not even got up on her feet in loud cheer.

“Uh, Tohka. What’s wrong? You can lie down if you’re feeling uncomfortable, okay?”

“……——Nuu?”

At Kotori’s question, Tohka was despondent for a few seconds, followed by an abrupt twitch of her eyebrows.

“Ahh…… Sorry. I was just thinking.”

“Chewing over some matter……? That Tohka? Even more important than pizza? ……No, I didn’t mean it that way.”

She had unintentionally said something offensive, correcting herself in a hurry.

But Tohka did not take it to heart——it would be better to say that her mind was being occupied by a matter of greater urgency, which caused her to ponder aloud in place.

“Did something happen? For you to go so far…”

“Muu…… Nothing much, it’s just that I met some weird boy at school yesterday.”

“A weird boy?”

“Umu. A boy I don’t know came into my classroom, and he even called Origami’s and my name. But after we told him that we didn’t know him, he had a hurt look and went out……”

“Who’s that supposed to be? A fan of yours? Though it is quite weird, do you really have to be this bothered……”

When she reached that point, Kotori suddenly jerked her brows while exclaiming an ‘Ah’. ——About the boy Tohka had described, Kotori was also well aware.

“Is something wrong—?”

Noticing a change in Kotori’s bearing, Miku doubtfully asked. With one hand propping her lower jaw, Kotori replied.

“……Now that you mention it, I met a similar guy yesterday, too. When I woke up in the morning, I saw a boy I had never seen before making breakfast in the kitchen.”

“Ehh!? How did that happen—! A horror movie—! A-Are you alright, Kotori- san!”

“A-Ah, I immediately ordered him to get out. I even requested Fraxinus to consolidate their security, so things should be fine, I guess……”

Just as Kotori’s speech ended, it was then Miku’s turn to exclaim ‘Ahh’ with a clap of her hands.

“W-What’s wrong, Miku?”

“C-Come to think of it, I had an encounter as well——! Yesterday, an unexpected

call arrived——! Then some guy suddenly began to talk. It freaked me out——! And when I looked at the contact screen, it even displayed 'Darling'!? I have absolutely no memory of ever recording it, so it scared me to death——!"

As the Spirits listened to these accounts, each of them seemed to have recalled something, their expressions wavering.

"Ne, Yuzuru, about that, is he not that person?"

"Recollection. We have also come into contact. A male had rushed into our classroom before homeroom commenced and fiercely interrogated us, 'Do you still remember me!?'"

"……Ah——It feels like I'm in the same boat. At that time, I was pulling an all-nighter to work, then the sound of the doorbell *dingdong* *dingdong* came. I shooed him away, though."

"N-Natsumi-san and I too! Before we set out yesterday, a strange boy had wanted to talk to us……"

"……Ah—, hm, that's true. We were even followed. Dunno what that's all about. It's horrible whenever I think of it……"

Being embraced by Yoshino, Natsumi could finally manage to murmur a reply with one eye closed.

Kotori could not refrain from creasing her eyebrows as she took everyone's testimonies into consideration.

"A boy who's met with all of us, huh……? No, everyone didn't necessarily meet the same person…… but we can't just ignore it and be too optimistic."

There was of course the possibility that he was simply a random pervert, although the same could be said for one of DEM's staff members.

Despite not knowing the exact objective of that boy, everyone present here was a Spirit that possesses cataclysm-level abilities. A precaution was better than none.

"For the time being, let's all be on the alert just in case. If anything were to happen, please inform me immediately."

"I-I see……"

"Understood——! We'll always keep in touch——!"

"……Ah, even though a guard wouldn't hurt, could you hand me a capable baby? I'm so spent now. Particularly…… if only you could give me a child who's able, has a petite figure and a name that starts with 'Nia'."

"……Um, Kotori, I'd like a change of name, what should I do?"

The Spirits nodded with alacrity. ……Well, regardless of having discerned a bizarre demand from a certain someone, Kotori ignored that for the moment.

Nevertheless, there was a single girl who did not provide a response. ——It was Origami.

Mute ever since, she went through with being silence till the end while being absorbed in a staring contest with the floor. Though not one for words by and large, Origami's current demeanor seemed somewhat distinct from anything in the past. Kotori stole a glance at her expression and vocalized.

"Origami, are you feeling alright?"

"……No problem, just a bit of a headache."

"Isn't that a problem…… Don't force yourself. If you're feeling tired, I'll take you home."

"……Forgive me for the inconvenience."

Origami answered in a weakened, frail tone, which was rarely seen from her.

The worried Kotori walked towards Origami's side, allowing the girl a shoulder to lean on.

"Can you stand?"

"……No pro——"

In an attempt to rise, Origami suspended her arm over Kotori's shoulder. But in that instant, Origami's body abruptly lost any rigidity and looked as if it was about to collapse onto the ground.

"Origami!?"

"Wha……!"

"A-Are you feeling okay!?"

All of a sudden, the Spirits gathered in the living room uttered voices of shock. Nonetheless, that was to be expected. After all, the one who toppled over was none other than the stalwart girl Origami.

“Guh——”

As Kotori sucked in a breath, she was just about to call Fraxinus with her hand phone to seek aid. There was no saying where Origami’s present condition lay, thus bringing her to the medical clinic aboard the ship would be by far faster than sending for an ambulance.

However, the moment before Kotori could even push the dial button, she stopped.

“……”

The reason was straightforward. Origami, who had just been keeled over on the floor, got up like nothing ever happened.

“Origami……? Don’t stand when you’re not feeling all that well. If anything were to happen to you!”

Kotori called out to Origami in a flurry, yet she only shook her head as though everything that occurred just now was merely a joke.

Then, she looked straight into Kotori’s eyes and spoke.

“It’s nothing——I’m fine. I’m sorry to have worried you.”

Her manner of speech, for some reason, seemed to carry a striking difference unlike any before.

“……”

Cold sweat beaded on Kotori’s cheeks as she heard her.

“O-Origami?”

“Here. What is it?”

“That, let me ask you, are you Origami?”

“Eh? Yes, I am. What are you talking about?”

Remarking so, Origami made a wry smile. Such expression permeating with vim and vigor jolted the Spirits aback.

“H-Hii……!”

“Dumbstruck. A fever? Rather, Master Origami, has your brain……”

“Someone——! Origami-san——! Save Origamiiiiii!”

“Uh, is that how you think of me……?”

Witnessing everyone’s inordinate reactions, Origami could only laugh.

That being said, as if something had struck Origami’s mind right away, her expression took a steep decline. She observed everyone and opened her mouth.

“Well…… forget it. More importantly, were everyone’s previous words serious? Has everyone genuinely——forgotten ‘him’?”

“Eh……?”

Origami’s words caused a twitch in Kotori’s brows.

“‘Him’…… Don’t tell me, you mean that conundrum of a boy who had appeared before us?”

Solely that person could be thought of when conjuring up the ‘him’ in the topic. Kotori fumbled with her lower chin and voiced so.

Afterwards, Origami dynamically nodded her head.

“Looking at it like this, you’ve really forgotten. As expected, this must be Mukuro-san’s doing……”

“Mukuro?”

Kotori tilted her head at the name which came out of Origami’s mouth. It was a name she had nary an impression of.

“Well I never… did you also forget that? She’s the Spirit who inhabited the cosmos! Didn’t everyone confront her together before!?”

“W-What are you saying, Origami……”

Seeing the look of astonishment on Kotori’s face, Origami let out a dejected aspect as though she had understood everything.

“……So that’s how it is. She worked quickly. Not only about him, but the memories of herself were ‘sealed’ as well. With this, she would have indeed escaped

detection……”

“About that, Natsumi-san. I’ve a favor to ask of you…… Is it possible for Natsumi-san’s <Haniel> to produce a copy of <Michael>?”

“Eh……? Um, that thing called <Michael>, what’s it supposed to be? An angel?”

“That’s correct. It is an angel in the form of a key possessing the ability to unlock or lock the functions of almost anything.”

Origami turned her gaze towards Natsumi after speaking. The smaller girl responded while looking away so as to take cover from her potent scrutiny.

“……Nope, that’s impossible. If don’t get how it works, making a fake without a model is a waste of time.”

“I see……”

With knitted brows and a grimace, Origami stroked the corners of her lips, mumbling something to herself.

“……I didn’t expect the method of using <Haniel> to be out of reach too. Now that things are like this…… what should be done……”

“W-Wait a minute. I don’t understand anything. Origami, what in the world have you been going on about? Who’s Mukuro? And the ‘him’ you said……

Do you know that boy by any chance?”

Dithering, Kotori poured out her doubts. Hence, Origami looked attentively into her eyes and gestured.

“Yes. Everyone ought to be familiar with him. Everybody——no, each one of us ——was saved by Itsuka Shidou.”

“Shidou……”

The name Origami had just enunciated enkindled a slight furrow in Kotori’s eyebrows. …… it produced a nostalgic feeling of having heard it somewhere, but yet at the same time also unheard of before. It was a thoroughly subtle sensation. The other Spirits developed reciprocations akin to Kotori’s reaction.

However——

“Ugh…… guh……?”

Among the Spirits, one of them mirrored how Origami had been a few moments ago, pressing her head with her hand and tumbling onto her knees.

◇◇◇

“Hmhmhm, truly blissful. Ne, art thou not, Nushi-sama?”

“……Ahh, it’s blissful Mukuro.”

“Fufu, go to, go to.”

At Shidou’s reply, Mukuro exposed a sincere smile from the bottom of her heart, swinging back and forth her hand that was clasped onto Shidou’s.

“Ne, Nushi-sama. Dost thou love Muku?”

“Of course, lots of love.”

“Muku withal. Fufu…… ‘Tis pure bliss.”

With her cheeks slightly reddened, the smile on Mukuro’s face intensified.

“……”

Spotting her pristine expression of joy, Shidou could only grit his teeth.

He was currently holding hands with Mukuro, walking down one of the main roads of Tenguu City at a leisurely pace. It appeared that their previous date had given her considerable enjoyment. Therefore, she proposed that both of them take another stroll together.

“Ne, what is that?”

Every item in sight struck Mukuro as new and odd, her eyes gleaming with a curious sparkle every few steps she took as she entered a conversation with Shidou. On each occasion, the boy would kindly respond.

——In spite of that, Shidou was far from simply tagging along with her.

Some time ago, after <Haniel> had been rendered ineffective, Shidou did his utmost to cajole Mukuro.

Although he indeed loved her, he also regarded everyone as equally important. Shidou tried to persuade her to restore everyone to their former states.

Yet Mukuro made no effort to reply. Besides, she harbored no amount of malice. Precisely owing to Shidou's love for Mukuro, other women were supposed to be unnecessary. Furthermore, Shidou could not air his grievances without mincing his words precisely due to the presence of other women. Not in the least skeptical, she preserved such a system of values.

That's right. Mukuro was pure of heart just like that.

However, this will of hers ran counter to Shidou's aspirations.

"……"

But Shidou could not abandon all hope merely because of that.

In truth, the situation was nowhere near sanguine. As a matter of fact, Shidou had not even a single comrade, and the tool capable of breaking the status quo, <Haniel>, had been sealed by Mukuro.

Nevertheless, he possessed but one method of finding a way out of this stalemate. Shidou silently touched his lips.

——Through a kiss he could seal a Spirit's power.

Utilizing this mysteriously extraordinary ability that only Shidou could wield secured the means to an end.

Via opening her heart, making her fall in love, and kissing her; Doing so would seal Mukuro's power and subsequently return everyone's memories sealed by <Michael> to their original state.

Even so, this strategy was not without its flaws.

First of all, Mukuro's happiness level played a major role. It seemed that she was quite fond of Shidou; however, for someone who has been deprived of any support from Ratatoskr, Shidou had no way to determine whether her happiness level had crossed the threshold of being sealable. If so, he would be unable to act carelessly at will. Mukuro possessed <Michael>. Supposing that she discovered Shidou's intentions, even his ability to seal spiritual power could very well be, in turn, sealed off like <Haniel>.

The angel capable of sealing all existences of creation faced against the ability capable of sealing a Spirit's power. Shidou had no idea which side would triumph

over the other. If the worst were to befall him, Shidou would be out of possible moves. He could not take any rash measures.

Moreover——

"……Mukuro. Why, must you……"

The impetus behind Mukuro's irregular monopolization of Shidou as well as why she had closed off her own heart in the first place and resolved to remain in the lifeless vacuum of space.

Shidou believed that, under the circumstances wherein those reasons stayed undefined, even if her powers were successfully sealed, the source of the quandary would not be resolved.

"Hn?"

The words on the verge of leaking out of Shidou's mouth caused Mukuro to slant her head a little.

"Why, must you, do something like this? ……Say, I am, to you, 'intimate', right? What do you think that means?"

"Muku hath earlier told. Such vocable cleaves to no veils. ……Well, if obliged."

Mukuro stood upright, pressing against her lower jaw with her fingers.

"Ensuing Muku's descent to the terrain in Nushi-sama's bosom, Muku came by an aberration of a vision. Within that faint vision regard Muku Nushi-sama."

"A dream?"

"Mn. ……Natheless, Nushi-sama took no part in said vision. Twas a dolorous one at that. Of a callow fledgling forsaken in loneliness from grasp, committing themselves to a family."

"Eh——"

Mukuro's confounding elaboration made Shidou wrinkle his brows.

It was to be anticipated. After all, that dream was——

"Itsuka-kun!"

In that very brief moment, as if to halt Shidou's train of thought in the blink of an

eye, a voice calling his name resounded from behind.

"……Eh!?"

Shidou broadened his eyes in surprise, looking back in amazement.

There were a couple of reasons for his awe. The first was simple: ever since the previous day, Shidou had not been addressed with his own name by anyone other than Mukuro. Each and every one of his acquaintances and friends had been deprived of their respective memories, with the perpetrator being none other than Mukuro. Thus, it was no longer unorthodox for him to be not recognized by everyone.

The alternative reason was that——the quality of the voice had sounded exceptionally familiar.

"O-Origami!?"

Turning his head back to catch a glimpse of the girl standing there, Shidou could not help but vociferate. That's correct. The person who had called out Shidou's name out of nowhere was his classmate, the Spirit Tobiichi Origami.

Still, Origami had conformed to everyone else's behavior during their meeting yesterday. What exactly had she done to flee from the clutches of <Michael>'s ability——

"——Uh, ah……"

Amid his grave musing, Shidou noticed at long last.

Origami had addressed him not as *Shidou*, but as *Itsuka-kun*.

To boot, the aura which the girl before his eyes had been giving off was immeasurably milder than that of the usual Tobiichi Origami.

"D-Don't tell me…… you're the Origami of *this world*?"

Shidou's eyes rounded like full moons as he spoke.

"Ah, un…… Long time no see——saying that would be a bit odd. After all, I have frequently come face to face with Itsuka-kun."

Origami forced a laugh 'ahaha'.

In his very sight, the smile entirely uncharacteristic of Origami firmly convinced

Shidou. ——The girl now situated before his eyes was simultaneously Origami, yet also not Origami.

Shidou had once borrowed the power of the angel of time and travelled back in time, thus rewriting history.

Within Origami's body, there existed both the Origami of the former world and the Origami of the new world at the same time.

In spite of that, rather than stating that the two split personalities were partitioned extremely well, it would be better to say that both individualities had merged into a brand new Origami…… Nonetheless, it was crystal clear that this person was the Origami of the world after it had been altered.

However, another matter entered his mind at present. Shidou interrogated, restraining his urgent delirium.

"Origami….. You, still remember me!?"

"Of course. ——Even though the *me* on the surface seems to have her memories locked up. No, to be accurate, those memories were extracted out of their conduit, right?"

"……!"

Origami's words suppressed a breath from Shidou.

But this was sheer good luck. When Shidou had been isolated and without help, a friend came into view. This fact had become something akin to a cardiac stimulant towards the apprehension-engulfed Shidou.

Granted so——the current state of affairs would not be changed that easily.

"……Hueh?"

Beside him, Mukuro glanced at Origami's face with a gaze of incredulity.

"Thou art…… a leman of Shidou's. A branch in sooth, thy memories ought to have been made fast."

Mukuro sighed in displeasure, stretching her right hand forwards.

"——Well, it matters not. Whilst wherefore <Michael>'s catch was unbarr'd remains unknown, howbeit, a spare lock shall do."

Then, in mid-air, a glowing key staff manifested.

"……! Mukuro!"

Shidou could not hold back from yelling at the top of his voice. His actions were to be expected. His newly appeared comrade being sealed again would be outright unacceptable.

However——

"That won't do!"

For some reason, Origami had shouted first, outside of Shidou's expectations.

"If an angel manifests here and now——it'll be detected! By that person……!"

"Whom?"

"That person……?"

Origami's statements rendered Mukuro's and Shidou's heads askew.

Then, at the next split instant.

"——Huh."

Shidou's eardrums perceived a clank sound being transmitted from above.

As though drawn and mesmerized by that noise, Shidou lifted his head upwards.

Afterwards, he spotted a young girl with hands crossed and perched still on top of a street lamp.

Her long, enchanting, windswept hair was of the color of the Delphic night.

Her crystalline, diamantine pair of twinkling eyes, which possessed a dreamlike radiance, was tranquilly staring down at Shidou. A jet-black Astral Dress almost resembling darkness itself condensed into matter, twined round her body. If now were to be the evening, her veneer would flawlessly coalesce into the sky.

"Wha——"

Looking back at the girl seeming to exude magnificent rays like that of the Sun, Shidou was unable to eschew widening his eyes even more.

——This girl, he had an impression of her.

“Found you, wench. ……Un? Along with other strange people. Towards Spirits——Hmph, the man from that time. Perfect, just burn into ashes together.”

Exposing a solemn and stern expression as cold as ice, Tohka declared so with a morose tone which echoed a death sentence.

◇◇◇

Chapter 9 - Oblivion of the Outside

Untold myriads of mysteries still remain obscuring the phenomenon known as Inversion.

Kotori had remarked to Shidou when he first encountered an inverse form in the past.

It was a metamorphosis attributed when the Sephira crystal of a Spirit is shoved over the edge of despair; an unparalleled event where a Spirit's aggregate power plummeted to a negative numeral and transmuted into energy of a different nature.

Shidou knew of only three Spirits whom such an occurrence had ever happened.

The first was Origami. The girl had once vowed during her childhood to seek vengeance against her parents' enemy. In the wake of realizing the fact that it had actually been a future version of herself who travelled back in time, she had inverted due to the overwhelming trauma.

Another one was Nia. Having been immured by DEM for a prolonged period, enduring unimaginably atrocious torture and interrogation, she had inverted after those memories were forcibly awakened.

Then——there was one more.

It was none other than the person standing before Shidou.

"Toh… …ka"

He called out the name of that girl, who remained oblivious to the gravity of his gesture.

She showed no sign of recognizing that name to be her own.

In the month of August of the previous year, during the battle at DEM Industries' Japan Branch, Shidou had suffered a life-threatening injury from the Wizard Ellen Mathers.

Although his life had ultimately been saved by Kotori's healing flames, Tohka, after

witnessing that gruesome scene before her very eyes, had fallen into anguish so deep-rooted that her Sephira crystal had inverted.

The one who appeared then was the exact same person now overlooking them from atop the streetlight - 'Dark Tohka'.

Despite possessing the same appearance and voice as Tohka——she was an *existence* that was not Tohka.

An Inverse Spirit flaunting the gargantuan might of Demon King currently stood there.

"W-Why has Tohka inverted……?"

In spite of his train of thought derailing into a volatile and chaotic maelstrom, Shidou still managed to grudgingly squeeze out that sentence.

Being in her inverse form indicated that she had undergone a depressing experience similar to when she witnessed Shidou being murdered. Exactly what had happened to her during the course of Shidou's absence——

However, his pondering was cut short then and there.

The reason was very straightforward. While Tohka perched on top of the lamp post, her left hand seemed to lift something as coal-black particles of light fused together and converged into a sword.

"<Nahemah>……!?"

Shidou detained his breath. The Demon King <Nahemah>. As the counterpart of <Sandalphon>, it was a broadsword endowed with unparalleled destructive power.

If a thing like that were to be brandished in this tiny town, who knows how massive the collateral damage would be. Shidou issued a cry of misery.

"Stop it, Tohka! If you do that here——"

"Shut up. Begone."

Tohka deafened her ears to outside words, callously narrowing her eyes and waving <Nahemah> towards them.

A slash only describable as black light drew into the shape of a crescent moon as it rapidly advanced closer to Shidou's direction.

“U-Uwha!?”

The sudden attack sent shivers down Shidou’s entire body.

However at that moment.

“——<Unlock-Rātaibu>.”

Mukuro, who stood beside Shidou, raised <Michael> to unbar a humongous gate in mid-air that swallowed up the strike nearing her and Shidou. The associated impact of the slash, which was not caught within the effective range of the gate, fissured the ground and left an enormous scar on the asphalt of the paved sidewalk.

“Wah!?”

“W——What was that just now!?”

The sound of the abrupt eruption sparked a clamor of astonishment among the pedestrians in the vicinity.

But the present Tohka appeared to pay no attention to those peripheral people, merely shooting a penetrating gaze at Mukuro, who had nullified her previous attack.

“You bitch. You better have said your prayers after blocking that attack of mine.”

“Muku shall voice but thus. What be the purpose of thine advent? The remembrances of yours all have been by <Michael> sealed, wherefore must thou further intend to pester Muku and Nushi-sama, Muku shall spare not another pardon for thee.”

Mukuro displayed a not-so-happy expression. There was a slight twitch in Tohka’s eyebrows.

“——Just as I have intended, I’ll make you regret not dying in that last attack.”

As she declared that, Tohka took off the streetlight with a kick and touched down on the surface of the ground, gingerly hauling <Nahemah> in her hand while moving towards Shidou.

“Muu……”

Mukuro should have perceived the menace of the approaching Inverse Spirit as well. Simultaneously giving a glare not in the least careless, she lowered her center

of gravity and materialized <Michael> into its staff form.

This was the so-called explosive situation. An irksome aura of urgency permeated between the two, causing Shidou to retreat a step back subconsciously.

“Ugh……”

Still, he could not just leave them alone and unattended. If a full-scale duel were to flare up between Tohka and Mukuro, the whole street would be ravaged into scorched earth.

Nonetheless, the hostile tension built between the pair of Spirits on the brink of war was spurning any foreign influence like a brick wall. Although it was fundamentally dimensions apart from a barrier like a Wizard’s Territory, when nestled in-between the two of them, negligible existences such as humans would be effortlessly obliterated. That instinctual fear made Shidou stop in his tracks.

An ordinary person would be utterly unable to put an end to the fierce clash between them, let alone intervene.

Yet a hands-off approach towards their conflict would not suffice either.

Shidou settled to make the first move.

However, just then, a hand was placed on his shoulder as if to prevent his headway. ——It was Origami.

“Itsuka-kun, leave this to me. I… have a plan.”

“Eh……? B-But……”

Even if Shidou wanted to say more, Origami’s willpower seemed to be absolutely steadfast.

“——Please wait a moment!”

“What be the matter?”

“Are you going to stand in my way?”

“U-Uhh……!”

Stared down by both Mukuro and Tohka, Origami’s eyes watered while her shoulders trembled as though all her previous courage had been a pretense.

Nevertheless, seeming to have regained her self-control at last, Origami spoke up with a feeble tone almost of shillyshally.

“A-About that; please calm down and hear me out. ——Mukuro-chan.”

“……Hueh?”

Origami’s voice made Mukuro crease her eyebrows in astonishment. Firming her resolve, Origami looked into her eyes and continued.

“M-Mukuro-chan, you love Itsuka-kun, right? That’s why you’re unable to forgive Tohka-san for taking Shidou away.”

“Muu. Alas, that is the conspectus. Forbye, thou art another one.”

After she finished, Mukuro gripped <Michael> with a clanging sound, only for Origami to dissuade her from doing so.

“That won’t do! Itsuka-kun hates things like fighting! A-And I think there are other methods to win Itsuka-kun’s heart……!”

“……Hueh?”

Mukuro exposed a dumbfounded expression, as she lightly slanting her head.

Then, it was now the already impatient Tohka’s turn to restart her previously suspended strides.

Origami held her breath, rushing towards Tohka.

“T-Tohka-san, please take it easy too! What is Tohka-san’s motive……?”

“Tohka——are you referring to me? ……Forget it. I don’t know about motives or whatever. That man; that bastard has made me go through much misery.

I’ll be damned if I don’t avenge that utter disgrace. I couldn’t care less about you or that key Spirit, but if you so much as bother me, I won’t spare you again.”

They were pronouncements coming off the intense killing intent emanating from her, causing droplets of perspiration to bead atop Origami’s forehead.

However, among those statements, there was one particularly perturbing point which made her vociferate her mind out loud.

“Because Itsuka-kun put you through misery…… Was that when you appeared in

DEM's headquarters……?"

"I am unaware of the whereabouts. But my memory of that humiliation remains as clear as ever."

"……Though I've only heard about it, I know that it's in the past. Indeed, you were defeated by Itsuka-kun at that time——"

Halfway through Origami's speech, Tohka raised <Nahemah>. The jet-black body of the sword grazed past Origami's cheek, creating a slight wound on the surface.

"Hii!"

"Watch your mouth. Who was, by whom, defeated?"

"I-I'm sorry, my mistake……! When Tohka-san and Itsuka-kun confronted each other before, even though it was purely accidental and out of your hands, maybe some rather unpleasant memories were left behind……"

"……Hmph."

Tohka displayed a somewhat disgruntled expression and snorted. Be that as it may, her behavior this time could be considered as bounds safer.

Therefore, Origami set her mind at rest and resumed talking.

"If you would be so kind as to recall the event, then did Itsuka-kun swing his sword against you at that time? Did you surrender to his power?"

"Stop with the pleasantries. There's no way that could've ever occurred."

Tohka's behavior tensed up in alarmed consternation all of a sudden. Origami then spread out her hands as if to console Tohka and uttered.

"E-Exactly! Exactly!"

"……What did you say?"

"If we were to compare Itsuka-kun's actual strength, his could never match Tohka-san's! Yet the outcome wasn't that……! Then if you defeat Itsuka-kun here and now with full power, will you really feel like you've won……!? What's more, if you don't settle it here, you might never get another chance to wipe out your dishonor!"

"……"

Origami's eloquent oration caused Tohka to narrow her eyes and immerse herself in deep ponderation.

"For all that, in what way should I cleanse myself of the mortification brought about by that man?"

"It's….. t-through feelings! Not using brute force, but only by making him yield his heart can it be counted as a true victory!"

"……H-Hey, Origami."

Origami looked like she was trying to devise a method to persuade both of them, although it felt as if her train of thought gradually leaned towards an awkward route. Shidou issued a few sounds of uneasiness.

However, Origami, being wedged between two Spirits on the brink of battle, appeared to have made no response towards Shidou's qualms. With sweat soaking her face, she anxiously observed the pair's reactions.

Mukuro and Tohka then almost simultaneously tilted their heads as they interrogated Origami.

"Ergo, by what measures ought this imperious shrew to be worst'd and Nushi-sama's love procured?"

"Answer me. How do I make that man's heart surrender?"

"Yes. There's one method to realize your objective and decide the outcome."

"Hueh?"

"Oh?"

The two replied back with their interests piqued.

Origami exaggeratedly raised a hand and pointed in Shidou's direction.

"Whoever reaps Itsuka-kun's lips wins…… how does that sound?"

Having arrived at a dead end, Origami blurted that out.

"……Eh!?"

After a few seconds passed, Shidou suddenly shouted in a loud voice.

Naturally, his yell was not the end of it. Tohka again shot her shocked line of sight

at Origami.

“What’s that supposed to mean? Are you fooling around?”

“O-Of course not…… Or could you be afraid? As a Spirit, h-h-hyaa!?”

Midway, Origami’s utterances garbled uncontrollably.

The reason was simple. Tohka had swung <Nahemah>, brushing it by a hair’s breadth past the tip of Origami’s nose.

“Think very carefully whether some words should be said.”

“O-Okay……”

Origami responded while her legs were trembling and faltering.

Yet after she had repudiated <Nahemah>, for some reason, Tohka buried her chin within her palm as if deliberating in silence.

“Hmph. ——However, when I first arrived here, that man did much the same to me as well. ——Indeed, I had been taken in then. ……A chance for retaliation could also be a delight.”

“……Eh?”

Mukuro could not help but shrink her pupils into two tiny dots at Tohka’s words, pouting in resentment afterwards.

“Tarry. Whence comes your rule to decide? Nushi-sama’s lips…… say thou?

How be that licit for dénouement?”

“That’s all right. Precisely, Tohka-san’s aim is to make Itsuka-kun’s heart submit. Given that the bond between Mukuro-chan and Itsuka-kun is very strong, wouldn’t there be no problems…… Or could it be that you don't have the confidence to win? That Itsuka-kun would rather choose Tohka-san instead of Mukuro-chan?”

“……Hueh?”

Mukuro directed the front tip of <Michael> at Origami’s abdomen…… and impaled it, causing Origami to scream.

“W-What is this!? Even though it doesn't hurt, what in the world is this!!”

“Fasten thy mouth or Muku shall turn this…… Procuring Nushi-sama’s lips foremost…… Hueh, mayhap thus is verily one tenable stratagem to make plain the true distinction to this vixen.”

Mukuro retracted the key from Origami’s stomach while mumbling.

“H-Hah!?”

The pair reached unanticipated conclusions, forcing a shade of outright disbelief to dye Shidou’s face. He would have never thought that the both of them would be utterly deceived and persuaded by Origami’s flowery, flattering rhetoric.

Shidou pointed a helpless gaze as if saying “What should I do……” at Origami. She thereupon gave a thumbs up and articulated, “Isn’t that great, Itsuka-kun?” Afterwards, she fumbled with her own lips, knocking her chest as some gesture.

“What…… Ugh, ah……”

Only then did Shidou recognize what Origami had been hinting at.

Exactly. She neither had been indicating the ruse of self-injury nor hoping for Shidou to become a sacrificial pawn.

With Shidou’s kiss——in other words, through sealing Mukuro’s spirit power or awakening the original Tohka——the status quo could be contravened.

Shidou was in awe at the suddenly-arising proposal, however, this method would definitely——

But.

“——!?”

In a split second, Shidou’s contemplation was abruptly cut short.

It had been a little too late when his brain comprehended the circumstances at last. A scene he had previously witnessed reoccurred. Tohka had stomped on the ground with her foot. A shadow had appeared before his eyes, and then——the vast sky could be seen.

That’s right. Tohka had near instantly closed the distance between Shidou and her, grabbing and dragging him down unceremoniously.

“Eh!? Ah!? Wait——”

“Shut up. It’ll be over right away.”

After Shidou’s panic-stricken hysteria, Tohka spoke an excessively unruffled line as she exerted strength to heave him.

She then looked down at Shidou with a grim mien, her lips inching nearer and nearer to his. Being assaulted so; Shidou could only let her do as she pleased.

Yet——Shidou’s and Tohka’s lips were unable to kiss.

A second before the couple’s lips would have touched; Tohka’s head had been prodded by the tip of an enormous key.

“Debarr’d!”

Mukuro stared at Tohka with piercing suspicion.

“——Hmph.”

Tohka straightened her posture, dodged the threat and darted a glance at Mukuro’s eyes. She next clutched onto Shidou’s neck with one hand, while slashing down <Nahemah> with the other.

A sunless gloom surged forth from <Nahemah>, thoroughly hollowing into the ground. Nevertheless, Mukuro evaded that attack by a turn of her body with minimal effort, raising <Michael> against Tohka once again.

<Nahemah> was capable of rending an Astral Dress asunder with even a single strike, whereas <Michael> could seal its opponent’s power with the slightest touch. A Demon King and Angel each possessing their own respective annihilating force collided at a speed indiscernible to the naked eye.

Indubitably, all of these happened right in front of Shidou, whose neck was still being grasped by Tohka.

“H-Hyaaaaa!?”

A few millimeters of distance ahead of the tip of Shidou’s nose, the sword and key shrouded in spirit power flew across one another successively.

Since Tohka’s left hand had tightly locked his neck into place, Shidou was unable to move a muscle even if he had wanted to. Rather——if he were to so much as budge, perhaps there would be a massive hole on top of his head.

“————!”

“Huh——”

Furthermore, amid such a tempest of sword and staff, Tohka and Mukuro remained adamant towards the goal of Shidou’s lips. Inevitably, Shidou’s body and neck were at their critical breaking point, moving back and forth like the motion of an action movie star’s nunchakus. The potent G-force gradually drained him of his consciousness.

“Wait…… stop! Stop, you two!”

Prior to Shidou fainting, Origami’s voice resounded once more.

“L-Like I said, not that way! Granted that your aim is a kiss, it’s different from using brute force!”

“……Muu?”

“……Hueh?”

Origami’s declaration caused Tohka and Mukuro to furrow their eyebrows in bewilderment. Thus, the deadlock of offence and defense between them came to a halt as Shidou’s body fell onto the ground with a thud.

“Guh!”

A doleful groan came out of his throat. Origami displayed genuine concern for the boy, while the other two emitted purposive, wispy voices.

However, as though uncaring about the fact that she had just been grappling Shidou’s neck, Tohka turned her vision towards Origami.

“Then, what should be done?”

Tohka asked Origami, staring fixedly at her.

“……Hm.”

Mukuro seemed tantalized by that matter too. She exhibited a gaze keener than Tohka’s aimed straight in Origami’s direction.

Under the attentive scrutiny of the two Spirits, Origami appeared to avert her head and to be sorting out her sentences, albeit convolutedly, as droplets of sweat surfaced on her face.

“Eh? Uh, for…… for instance……”

◇◇◇

——After about an hour had elapsed.

“I will feed you. Open your mouth. Or else I’ll blast a hole open on your face.”

“Thou needn’t glean the words this vexatious wench, Nushi-sama. Twigging her comportment, she cleaves to a malformed pate. More importantly, come, come hither to Muku’s side.”

“What, you bitch!”

“On what premises?”

“……About that.”

A crushing pressure, unlike before, had assailed from both sides again.

The venue was a café far from the main street where the pair had caused quite a haphazard brawl. That was to be expected. After having created a disturbance of such degree, there was no way that there would be a place lingering nearby; in which, they could be tranquilly sipping tea.

No——describing it as ‘tranquil’ would be misleading. After all, Shidou was presently being caught in a pincer movement between Tohka on his left and Mukuro on his right, both of whom were trying to stuff a strawberry into his mouth using forks.

Tohka had been cajoled, though painstakingly, into changing her Astral Dress to ordinary clothes for the moment——that being said, the overwhelming arm-twisting emanating from her had not shown any signs of abating.

Moreover…… how to put it. The café Origami had brought them to felt somewhat dissimilar from an ordinary café.

“Welcome back, Goshujin-sama~!”[1]

“Have a safe trip, Goshujin-sama~!”

There stood charming shop personnel sporting pleated aprons, welcoming guests inside or seeing them out.

Yes, this was where girls served customers as female attendant: the reputed maid

café. ……Shidou had once passively entered this bistro in the past due to particular circumstances, so he was well aware of the business model here.

"……Ne, Origami. Why have we come to this kind of shop?"

"……S-Sorry. I thought we wouldn't attract much attention here……"

As Shidou questioned in a low voice, Origami, who was sitting on a seat opposite to his, responded apologetically.

Exactly. Origami was the one who had selected their current setting…… Or it could be phrased that the cause which had led them to their predicament was Origami.

The reason was straightforward. She, previously being coerced by Tohka and Mukuro, had said so in her disorder:

『A kiss should come after becoming intimate on a date, right……』

『As I said, tell me the specifically about the details of the method.』

『I-I'm not that knowledgeable either…… Um, what about feeding him food and such……?』

『Hsueh. So be it. Assay Muku shall.

Just like that, Shidou was being weighed down by two Spirits possessing calamitous powers, awaiting their incessant advance at a metronome's pace.

But for some reason…… perhaps it would be better to say that the two had not given up on their duel of strength yet, seeming to have not understood Origami's words either.

Furthermore, Shidou too was still incapable of comprehension. As his mouth was forcefully crammed by forks from both sides at the same time, Shidou asked Origami, who looked slightly different compared to usual.

"……Ne, Origami. Why did Tohka invert……? And you also……"

"Uh…… My situation is that, because Mukuro-chan locked my memories, only the section which can link memories is left——the *me* who would almost never come out under normal circumstances has manifested. As a result……"

Origami verbalized while peering in Tohka's direction with her heart in her mouth.

"Tohka-san's condition is I believe…… on account of her memory frequency being

sealed off and subconsciously accumulating the sense of losing Itsuka- kun. I can't think of any other way Tohka-san could have fallen into despair, eh?"

"R-Really."

What could have made Tohka fall into despair——It appeared that nothing had befallen Kotori and the others. Although not even exhaustively apprehending the state of affairs would appease one's mind, Shidou temporarily heaved a sigh of relief.

However, possibly getting concerned about Shidou's state of affairs, the Tohka on his left abruptly snatched his head with impatience.

"What balderdash have you been spouting since just now? Enough look at me."

"Guh-hya!"

Shidou's neck was compelled to turn, his throat emitting an anguished wail.

But Tohka was not in the least worried for him as though it was a matter of course, laying sight on Shidou's lips towards which she outstretched the fork with a strawberry skewered on it.

Yet, in the next instant, a small 'gate' rifted open right before his mouth, engulfing Tohka's fork whole.

"What……!?"

"Ahh——."

Then, such a tone could be heard from Mukuro. Shidou rotated his eyes towards her, and the fork extended through a *gate* in front of Mukuro, who ate the strawberry in one bite.

It seemed that at the precise moment Tohka's strawberry was about to infiltrate Shidou's mouth, Mukuro had opened another miniature *gate*, causing the fork to move towards her mouth instead.

Chewing the fruit and gulping it down, Mukuro made an audacious simper at Tohka.

"What's ado? Thou might have weened that to be Nushi-sama's viands, howbeit 'tis Muku's. Hm, lest perchance thy grail is Muku's lips?"

"……"

Tohka creased her brows with grievance, and the next instant, she hurled the fork at an uncatchable velocity.

As a high-pitched 'ping' sound reverberated, the strawberry Mukuro had held out, along with even the front tip of her own fork itself, was sent flying up.

"Hn?"

Mukuro, lagging behind by a beat, turned her head while Tohka opened her mouth, pressing closer to the parabolic trajectory traced by the falling strawberry.

After munching the red fruit, Tohka spat the front end of the fork out onto the floor. The stainless steel piece of cutlery landed with a clang.

"I could say the same about you. Fishing out that wafer of fruit before me without even the slightest precaution and more so offering it to me proposes no difference."

"What say thou……?"

Mukuro darted a disrelishing gaze at Tohka.

Just when the circumstances had deteriorated to such an extent…

"Ahh! That won't do, Ojou-samas."

As if perceiving the consistently enlarging tumult in the seats at one corner, a maid had made an appearance on the scene to handle the complications at Shidou's table.

"……What do you want, wretch?"

"……Hueh, what exceeding daft habiliments."

The two Spirits put on nonplussed expressions as they observed the maid.

There was a minute twitch in her eyebrows for a split second, but precisely since she was a professional, the maid's demeanor quickly reverted to their campaigned smiley face, persisting with her adorable appearance.

"If you continue to be so rude, no wonder Goshujin-sama is at sixes and sevens. Why don't you try feeding him more delightfully?"

"Give thou Muku what counsel?"

At Mukuro's enquiry, Maid-san's beaming smile intensified.

"If you'd like Goshujin-sama to eat cake, allow me to let you in on a secret spell. Put your hands together in the shape of a heart and——"

"……Like this?"

"Hueh."

In the course of learning, Mukuro and Tohka framed their hands into a heart.

Origami, who had been eyed by the maid, too imitated the example.

"Alright, are you ready——? Repeat after me. Become delicious, Moe Moe Kyun
"Become delicious."

"Moe Moe Kyun."

Tohka remained impassive, whereas Mukuro seemed a bit baffled as they mimicked Maid-san's gestures and locution. ……In fullness, it gave off an impression of surrealism.

"Okay! It's done! Now, Goshujin-sama would really like to eat cake, right!"

"Eh? M-Me?"

"Would - really - like - to - eat - cake - right?"

Being flung a phrase out of nowhere, Shidou was at his wits' end as the Maid- san confirmed so while edging near his face.

Despite the fact that she was bearing her business-model smile, how was Shidou to react——She was exuding some sort of intimidating pressure which said, "Don't make another fuss. These are surely your women. Make sure to keep a leash on them."

"……O-Of course! I absolutely adore cakes the most!"

"Very well! You earn a gold star!"

With a gentle giggle, Maid-san withdrew from the table.

"——I see. You merely need to hear it."

Tohka followed the maid's figure with her eyes, letting out a groan with her nose. Then, she reached for one of the plates on the table with cake still remaining and

placed it on the floor.

"……? Is something wrong?"

Unable to make sense of Tohka's conduct, Shidou uttered so in puzzlement.

She thereupon placed her hands together into the shape of a heart, pointing it at the plate on the floor.

"Become delicious. Moe moe kyun!"

After casting the charm on the cake, Tohka caught hold of Shidou's shirt and pulled hard.

"W-Wah!"

Her ferocious wrist strength tossed Shidou onto the floor, rendering him in a crawling position with both hands on the ground.

"Very well then."

Tohka contentedly nodded, releasing Shidou's shirt.

Afterwards, she rose from the chair and took a seat on Shidou's back. The supple tactile impression, moderate weight, and most importantly the posture all engendered an ineffable tingle of immorality in Shidou, reddening his cheeks.

"Wait……!? W-What are you doing, Tohka!?"

"This spell will make you want to eat that. A cur like you can only grovel and shovel down what's on the plate."

"No, y-you……"

"Have I permitted you to talk with that mouth of yours?"

"Ah!"

Tohka gave Shidou's ass a slap. The sharp pain caused him to emit a loud yell.

"Now, eat like the dog you are."

While she ordered so, Tohka pressed down on Shidou's head.

As if in concert with her, Mukuro got up from her chair on the right of Shidou and went to crouch in front of his face.

“What an ill-bred wench. Nushi-sama, allow Muku to serve thee.”

Having said so, Mukuro seized a new fork, took a chunk of cake into her mouth, and just like that pinched Shidou’s cheeks with her hands, sticking her lips onto his.

“H-Hey, Mukuro!?”

Realizing what she was attempting, Shidou could only let out his voice.

However, the next instant, Shidou’s head was abruptly tugged upwards, prompting Mukuro’s lips to stray off course and come into contact with the edge of his lower jaw.

Shidou was not the one who had swerved his head but Tohka, who had perceived Mukuro’s ulterior motive and pulled Shidou’s hair.

“What dost thou? Be not a cumber.”

“——Give me a break. You were scheming to kiss him, weren’t you?”

“Hueh? How now? Muku is but feeding Nushi-sama gateau.”

“Very well. Since you’ve failed to comply with the agreement, it’ll be easier to handle. Killing you and then making this man yield will do as well.”

“Thou? Kill Muku? None other than maundering twaddle. It seems that thou hast fairly a knack to play a jester.”

“You bitch!”

Tohka’s and Mukuro’s death gazes connected, and unseen sparks vigorously enkindled in mid-air.

“Ojou-samas, for your information, this is a maid café!! Why are you sitting on Goshujin-sama?”

Having heard some commotion, the Maid-san before them came over once again.

“What’s wrong, wretch? Do you want to be knocked down too?”

“Tohka……!?”

Shidou and Origami apologized numerous times with their heads bowed down as they quickly dragged Tohka and Mukuro out of the coffee shop.

◇◇◇

“——Are Tohka and Origami’s coordinates still unknown!?”

Fifteen thousand meters above Tenguu City, the airship Fraxinus floated in the sky as Kotori, sitting on the captain’s seat, interrogated the crew members.

“Yes…… Nothing spotted east of Tenguu City.”

“Because I didn’t bring my mobile phone, I can’t use the GPS to locate them……”

The staff in the lower section of the bridge responded while operating their respective consoles. Kotori could only grit her teeth.

“Kuh……!”

Ever since both Tohka and Origami disappeared from the Itsuka residence, close to a couple of hours had already elapsed. Within that period of time, despite a meticulous search having been carried out, the two’s whereabouts were yet to be pinpointed.

“What in the world could’ve happened to those two……!”

Kotori recited in a dejected tone.

As a matter of course, to Kotori, if the two had just been out for the time being, such an overdramatized reconnaissance would not have been needed.

Yet, Kotori’s consternation was not without rationale or reason.

First of all, there had been a change in Origami’s behavior.

At that time, her character seemed to undergo a tremendous reorientation, which stirred up a few knots of incredulity among Kotori and the other Spirits.

——Recollecting comprehensively, Kotori should have known that Origami.

Exactly, that was the personality of the Origami who belonged to this world, the world after alteration. Although the cause still remains unknown, the personality which had merged with that of the previous world had manifested all of a sudden ——

“Ch……!”

As she contemplated, Kotori felt a stinging pain in her head, quickly using her palm to suppress the side.

World change, even though it was a matter of such severe gravity, who exactly perpetrated it and why Kotori believed the case to be literal fact without doubting it in the slightest were undefined in her mind.

“Is all this…… related to that guy?”

Kotori lifted her head with a contorted face, murmuring.

The name Origami mentioned, Itsuka Shidou, possessed the same surname as Kotori’s own name.

At that time, only Origami had known the identity of the boy who had appeared before everyone.

Alongside Mukuro, a Spirit that allegedly lived in the cosmos, while wielding an angel in the shape of a key.

Neither Kotori nor everyone had any recognition of that person or Mukuro, none could be reminisced. Fraxinus’ staff too was completely clueless, and when they asked the Artificial Intelligence MARIA, she merely responded, “Data not found.”

Yet under those circumstances, only Tohka had pressed her head with a grimace of pain——like Origami, she had displayed unprecedented behavior, gradually upheaving her cranium.

Then, Tohka scanned her surroundings and pointed her line of sight at Origami, asking where they were, thereafter materializing a jet-black sword and leaving once she wrecked the Itsuka household.

Exactly. ——She had inverted.

Despite the cause being unknown right now, Tohka’s Sephira crystal had indeed undergone a transformation in its cardinal nature.

Due to the phenomenon occurring under a situation wherein no warning had been broadcast, the inverse Spirit had been let to roam freely outside. What this precisely implied was not at all rocket science, however, above that;

Kotori was more concerned about Origami and Tohka returning back to normal. Moreover, the key to unravelling this matter perhaps lay in the hands of the name Origami had mentioned——

"……! Commander!"

Kotori's train of thought was suddenly stopped in its tracks when crew member <Nail Knocker> Shiizaki's voice resounded from the lower bridge.

"Activity from the two of them has been detected!"

"Really!? Can you provide a visual!?"

"Affirmative! Currently instructing autonomous cameras to rendezvous at once……"

Before Shiizaki could even finish speaking, the pixels on the main monitor screen had already focused into a discernable image.

It appeared to portray a maid café located within the city. In a corner of the shop, silhouettes of Tohka and Origami, who had vanished from the Itsuka residence, could indubitably be confirmed.

No——to be accurate.

"That guy is…… and that girl is……"

Kotori wrinkled her eyebrows. Apart from the two, the guy she had met the previous day was present along with the figure of a never before seen girl.

On top of that, the loudspeakers inside the bridge immediately sounded an alarm afterwards.

"Wha…… What is it this time!?"

As if with the intention to reply Kotori, the string of characters 'MARIA' was outputted on the auxiliary monitor.

"——Spirit waves identified. Tohka inherently emits such undulations, while anomalously exorbitant waves have been observed in the female beside her."

"What did you say……?"

A thunderstruck expression cropped up on Kotori's face as she watched the girl reflected on the screen. She was a delicate girl with blonde hair and golden eyes. Unaware of why, when Kotori looked at her physique——her chest region in particular——she felt enveloped by a sensation akin to recollecting a certain embarrassing mortification happening in the distant past…… possibly a chance encounter from another life.

Even so, now was not the time to be thinking on such affairs. Since spirit waves have been perceived from her, then so be it.

“A…… Spirit? Could she be the *Mukuro* that Origami was talking about?”

“Such a hypothesis is appropriate. Furthermore, Spirit fluctuations of a minuscule wavelength have also been distinguished as emanating from that boy.”

“Huh……!?”

Maria’s monotones elicited a gasp from Kotori.

“Hold it right there. That guy’s a Spirit too!?”

*“*I am unable to confirm, it seems that there are slight deviations from the standard Spirit wavelengths coming from a normal Spirit.”

Unswervingly yet meaningfully, Maria expounded.

“What…… the hell happened……”

As Kotori’s face was dyed with apprehensiveness, she viewed the screen anew.

On the monitor was a male youth——Shidou, who was crawling on the floor while being sat on by Tohka and fed cake mouth-to-mouth at the same time by an unfamiliar girl——Mukuro.

“……Really, what in the world……”

Kotori mumbled in a muffled voice while putting her hand on her forehead.

At this time, an ominous ambiance brewed amid Tohka and Mukuro, on the verge of eruption.

Then, Origami doggedly interposed herself between them as Shidou attempted to coax the two with all his might. Subsequently, they exited the café and headed towards a different location.

“E-Even though we haven’t figured out their motives yet, we can’t just let them be. In short, keep a close eye on them! Set the alert level to the highest possible! Prepare to move at any time!”

“Roger!!”

All the personnel shouted together in unison.

◇◇◇

"……Hn."

In the street, Mukuro heaved a downcast sigh.

——From just now, her mind had kept feeling like a pincushion being pricked by the pins of agitation over and over again.

That was but a matter of course. Ultimately, two girls whose recollections should have been sealed by Mukuro in order to be alone with Shidou had appeared.

What could be the root of all this? <Michael>'s power was absolute. Tohka and Origami should not even be able to remember Shidou.

However, in reality, Tohka and Origami had appeared before Mukuro, thwarting her meeting with Shidou. There was no blaming her for developing unbearable dejection.

After departing from the coffee shop, Mukuro and the others had strolled for a period of time under the guidance of Origami in the direction of their next date site.

Be it the cinema, arcade, or department stores…… regardless of where, Tohka kept intervening in Mukuro's repetitive endeavors to steal a kiss from Shidou's lips. Both parties were in locked in a stalemate.

If there was anything exasperating, it would be the fact that she was incapable of reveling in the briefest amounts of time all alone with Shidou.

And owing to the presence of Tohka and Origami, Mukuro's time with Shidou was being whittled down little by little, which constituted a major part of her mental strain.

Shidou belonged to only Mukuro. He loved only Mukuro. Only Mukuro could love him. Those two outsiders had stepped foot and trespassed into their territory. It was truly unforgivable.

Mukuro had no intention of being detested by Tohka and Origami, and therefore acted so Due to the existence of those two, more and more of Shidou's and her time together was being frittered away.

Shidou had associated with, responded to, and smiled at people other than Mukuro.

His voice, words, and expressions were supposed to be for Mukuro alone.

Yet, it had been snatched away by others.

At this point, Mukuro sensed an impulse bludgeoning her to scrape her very own skin off.

"……What hath befallen……"

Whispering in a feeble voice inaudible to everyone, she crossed the tips of her thumbs.

In the first instance, Mukuro ought to have instantly skewered their brains with <Michael> and locked up their memories.

Nevertheless, Origami pleaded innocent, and Tohka was constantly on the lookout for Mukuro. Things would not go that smoothly. Additionally, the reason as to why both of them could be exempted from <Michael>'s ability remained in doubt. As a consequence, even if she were to seal their remembrances a second time, there was no guarantee that they would abide in such a state and not intrude upon her view once again.

Perhaps, similar to what Shidou did in outer space, there prevailed another angel that could replicate <Michael>'s powers. If such was the case, the fact that they were able to remember Shidou would prove to be explainable and well within the bounds of probability.

However, by the same token, the aspect wherein the other girls' recollections stayed *sealed* became dubious. No, there was a possibility that everybody had already recouped their memories and was conspiring in a plot to take Shidou away from Mukuro……

"——E-Erm, our next destination is here."

Amid Mukuro's thought process, Origami, who was leading the party, had ceased her steps and articulated so.

It appeared that they had arrived at the upcoming battlefield for Tohka's and Mukuro's fight for Shidou.

Mukuro, on pins and needles, creased her brows and turned her gaze in the direction at which Origami was pointing.

“—— ……Hm.”

Mukuro could not refrain from holding her breath.

Thump. Her heartbeat accelerated fiercely, and her breathing began to turn erratic.

Why did it become like this? Even Mukuro herself was oblivious. However, the moment this object towering aloft came into her imminent view, a peculiar palpitation assailed her.

There stood——a monumental building with the exterior of a sky-scraping peak.

“……Well, this does look like a suitable place for a date.”

Having long since left the café, Shidou commented as he eyed in the direction indicated by Origami.

Before the entire group was a steeple soaring high into the clouds—— predominantly known as the Tenguu Tower. It was a ubiquitous radio tower which was reconstructed after the great spacequake in the South Kanto region three years earlier.

There was an observation tower in the interior, whereas the periphery of the structure was comprised of a diversity of business facilities. This site was commonly regarded as a tourist attraction, and many couples as well as families would often pay a visit to the bustling location.

“……Speaking of which; now that I think about it, Tenguu Tower has really gone through a lot of stuff.”

“Un, it was completely destroyed in the big spacequake three years ago……

A lot of new centers were then built.”

Origami said in acknowledgement.

Tohka, who had been crossing her hands, thereafter tapped on the banisters while shifting her vision.

“In that case, what’s up with this tower?”

“Ah…… about that, lovers who kiss on top of the lookout tower are blessed with good fortune, or rather, they’re said to be blessed according to an urban legend…… Well-matched with the contest, don’t you think?”

“Silly.”

Almost as if spitting the word out, Tohka sighed and raised her head in scrutiny of the tower.

“Whatever, to heck with it, as long as I can squash this man’s heart, the venue doesn’t matter. Choose somewhere he can worship me while you’re at it.”

……It seemed that she was wide off the mark again. Shidou and Origami shared a glance, each of their faces dripping with sweat.

At that moment, Tohka advanced in heavy strides by herself. Letting her wander alone in that condition would prove to be extremely precarious; as a result, Shidou and Origami hurried to catch up.

“Hm……?”

Shidou turned back.

The cause was obvious. Mukuro, who had been walking along with Shidou up till just now, had come to a standstill.

“Mukuro? What’s wrong?”

“……Nay.”

“Eh?”

Mukuro’s voice was hoarsely decrepit, making Shidou slant his head.

“……Nay. Go not. Hither…… go not.”

“Mukuro……?”

Shidou could not help but wince at her outlandish air.

Until the present——Mukuro, who had never once vacillated since Tohka’s and Origami’s appearance, was now evidently showing signs of discontinuity.

No, not only that but also, perhaps, foreboding.

“H-Hey, are you alright, Mukuro?”

Worried, Shidou looked closely at her face. Noticing the circumstances, Tohka and Origami too halted their steps and approached them.

“What now.”

“M-Mukuro-chan?”

Shidou placed his hand on the delicately quivering Mukuro’s shoulder, and looked towards Origami and Tohka.

“Though I don’t know what exactly is going on, Mukuro doesn’t seem to like this place. Should we go somewhere else?”

“Really? Then, let’s find another——”

“In other words, she’s admitting defeat.”

Tohka’s glacial tone punctuated Origami’s words. Shidou’s hand on Mukuro’s shoulder flinched slightly.

“I’m indifferent. This match with you is merely supplementary. You can just sit there and watch me humiliate that guy.”

“……Ugh, keep thy jests…… to thyself.”

Mukuro focused her field of vision, staring fixedly at Tohka. Afterwards, she gradually trod forwards with sluggish steps.

“H-Hey, Mukuro, you don’t need to force yourself, you know?”

“……Concern not. Muku shan’t ever concede Nushi-sama to that wench.”

In spite of her pallid, cadaverous complexion, Mukuro remained adamant and insisted.

Faces of unease began to betray Shidou and Origami as they each gave each other a quick look, but dissuading Mukuro was already beyond the question. Together, they then hastened to keep up with Tohka.

After purchasing entry tickets at the base of the premises, they ascended towards the lookout post using the elevator.

Throughout this period, Mukuro’s expression had taken no turn for the better.

Not long afterwards, the elevator came to a halt as it reached its stop.

Disembarking, Shidou tugged at Mukuro, whose feet were still heavy with torpidness.

The observation tower was constructed such that it commodiously girdled the elevator in the center and was surrounded with glass windowpanes. Inside were stores with local specialties on display, a modest café, and even simplistic shrines where people could give offerings to the deities of love.

Despite being termed a lookout tower, this was not merely a place for sightseeing.

“Hehe.”

Tohka remarked in a low voice, while walking towards the window reflecting the streetscape. Origami rushed to her side in a flurry.

On the other hand, Mukuro’s condition appeared to deteriorate.

“Mukuro, are you okay?”

“……Hn, Muku is unscathed.”

With a substantial nod, Mukuro straightened her posture and started to trudge forwards. Yet no matter how one saw her, it was palpably an empty show of waning strength.

“Um, Mukuro, what’s really bothering you? Are you afraid of heights?”

Shidou questioned anxiously. For a Spirit who had drifted through the cosmos, having acrophobia would be quite unlikely. Even though Shidou deemed so, the Mukuro of that time had basically sealed her own heart. The current Mukuro could very well fear a completely different thing altogether.

However, she sluggishly swayed her head from side to side.

“……Nay. Just…… for aught, Muku just disrelishes hither.”

“Hates here…… eh. Mukuro, could it be that you’ve come here before?”

“……Hm.”

As Shidou enquired, Mukuro’s shoulders trembled.

“Blur. Muku knows not.”

“Is that so……”

In that instant.

“——I see. This does feel delightfully distinct compared to flying in the sky.

Hmph.”

Tohka, who had been leaning on a glass panel, then reversed her bearing and proceeded towards the others.

“Well then, let the clash begin once more. We’ll see which one of us manages to steal this man’s lips first.”

“A-About that, Tohka-san. I hope you’re aware, like I said before……”

“I know. Deceiving and winning him over will do.”

“You don’t understand at all!?”

“Just kidding——All right, prepare yourself, key Spirit. I’ll pound that calm face of yours into pieces.”

Tohka dauntlessly declared, both of her hands tracing out the previously- learnt heart-shape gesture…… How was one to put it, she seemed to have confused this victory pose with some one-hit kill move.

Mukuro, who was in a near-limping state, forged ahead a pace as though in opposition.

“……Betake thyself. Thou shalt be edified that there is nary leeway for thee to entrench on betwixt Muku and Nushi-sama——……Guh.”

All of a sudden, Mukuro was struck by a dizzy spell and a vomiting reflex at lightning speed, forcing the girl to suppress her stomach and mouth, buckling her stance into a curve.

“M-Mukuro!?”

“Mukuro-chan!?”

In the thick of the hue and cry of environing visitors, Shidou and Origami ran towards her.

◇◇◇

“Are you okay, Mukuro-chan?”

"……Hueh."

Inside the ladies' restroom, Origami was patting Mukuro's back when she replied.

Head still teetering while gnawing, her body, which had been anguishing as if a wrecking ball had slammed into her belly a moment ago, started its ascent from rock bottom as the inclination to throw up was palliated. Mukuro erected her posture in an attempt to modulate her breathing by inhaling voluminous gulps of air.

……The origin as to why she was in such demurring repudiation and repugnance of this location likely dwelled in the forgotten lapses of her memory.

Although hypotheses of the area being under some form of preternatural enchantment or the sway of particular material could be postulated, a supposition of that gauge should have an impact on other people. Why was only Mukuro affected……

(——Mukuro, is it possible that you've been here before?)

Then, Shidou's fleeting suggestion sprang across Mukuro's mind.

Perhaps her own recollections had been sealed themselves, rendering her incapable of remembering past events, and she had indeed once come to this place before. And in turn, some rather unpleasant incident might have occurred here.

As one would expect, <Michael>'s ability was infallible. However, when the padlock to Mukuro's heart had been unlatched by Shidou, maybe a minor slip-up had dawned on her, thus creating the possibility of unanticipated chemistry arising between her remembrance and the current setting.

Provided with that, then unlocking her memories via <Michael> would instantaneously shed light on her present enigma along with the solution to—

"……"

Nevertheless, as she reached out her left hand to summon her angel, Mukuro firmly reined in her breath.

For some reason, a harshly dissentient resolution strangled her entire frame.

If it were to be opened, the rankling lack of certainty where her heart could utterly crumble into depravity vexed Mukuro to no visible end. This momentous prediction mutated into a perception of an absolute taboo, freezing her hand in place.

"……Mukuro-chan?"

Dumbstruck at Mukuro's condition, Origami nervously asked.

Mukuro drew in air afresh before she answered.

"……What be it?"

"U-Um, are you alright?"

"Verily…… Shall we make headway whitherward Nushi-sama lies?"

"Ah, un……"

Mukuro's pacing resembled that of the ill, dilapidated and sluggish. Origami followed her with persistent worry.

"……"

At the notion of that gentle caress back there, Mukuro abruptly came to a stop.

"……Thou art clept Origami, eh?"

"Um, yeah."

"Whenas time dictates thy memories be seal'd, Muku shal show thee spare mercy than that crepuscular wench."

"Eh?"

Mukuro's verses extorted a whimsical yelp from Origami.

"U-Uh, should I be…… thanking you for that?"

"……Hm."

Mukuro lightly crooned and turned to retreat from the lavatory.

"What's the matter with Mukuro……"

At the observation post atop Tenguu Tower, Shidou thought aloud with a face full of convolutedness.

That was but of course. Mukuro, having born a phlegmatic disposition just until a few moments ago, had collapsed right after entering Tenguu Tower and blenched in the echoes of a surreptitious trauma.

Granted that she was a baleful Spirit who had locked everyone else's memories, the point of fact that she was still a person necessitating protection remained unaltered. Shidou was distressed to extremes.

And——

"……"

Shidou's eyes darted to the side——merely to encounter Tohka, arms crossed and not in the least pleased.

"What's your damn problem?"

Keenly noticing, Tohka shot back a menacing stare. Shidou's body cowered.

"……! N-Nothing……"

That's right. Since Origami had accompanied Mukuro to the restroom, such a situation was bound to happen. To be frank, the tense atmosphere had been brimming ever since.

Perhaps tentatively for the sake of a fair fight, Tohka had been waiting with forbearance. However, if she were to blow a fuse and take to her heels, there would be no restraining her. Feeling such restlessness was nothing short of inevitable.

"……"

Be that as it may, with but a careful second thought, being able to converse face-to-face with an inverted Spirit was already far-fetched. Shidou had up till the present met three Inverse Spirits including Tohka. Because they may very well indiscriminately attack without rhyme or reason, if truth be told, Shidou himself had little to no experience in talking with them.

"Hey."

In the middle of Shidou's musing, Tohka suddenly spoke up.

"W-What is it?"

"Ever since just now——make that ever since ever, I've been wondering. Is the *Tohka* you keep spouting out with that mouth of yours supposed to be my name?"

Tohka gazed at him with an impersonal look.

Eyes broadening, mouth agape, and head bobbing were the only feedbacks Shidou could muster——rather than the content of her query, the aspect that Tohka would actually be the one to initiate a conversation with him astonished Shidou even more.

“Ah…… that’s true.”

“Was I——no, the me of this side the one who came up with that?”

“Not really…… it was me.”

“……”

Shidou replied honestly where after Tohka raised her foot and stomped on his.

“Uwah! W-What are you doing all of a sudden……”

“It moved by itself.”

“O-Oh……”

Shidou miserably lifted his head.

“……Do you have another name?”

“No, so despite my reluctance, don’t hesitate to call me using the name Tohka.”

“I see. ——Then, Tohka.”

Her foot came falling down again on his at the very mutter of that name.

“W-What now……”

“It moved on its own.”

“……”

As though to revivify himself, Shidou let out a little cough.

“……Um, Tohka. Who are you really? What does it mean to invert? In the first place, what is a Spirit……”

“Invert, huh. Is that supposed to be what you lot are calling the me of this side when she turns into me?”

“Un… yeah… I guess so.”

Tohka purveyed a humph and continued.

“——I abhor that terminology of yours. Speaking of which, I am the genuine incarnation of the Sephira crystal——a Spirit in and of itself.”

“Eh……? W-What does that mean?”

Bewilderment struck Shidou’s face as he asked.

Prior to Tohka’s inversion, Shidou had once listened to an explanation regarding the phenomenon from Kotori.

Yet even Fraxinus had not acquired full knowledge of the transformation, and Kotori had to delineate speculation based upon bits and pieces of information.

Fed up, Tohka pinched her eyebrows.

“When the First Spirit divided up its own power and created the Sephira crystals, their quintessential nature was that which you term inverse. Despite everything, the First Spirit changed it into what it is now. In other words, it’s the exact opposite of your assumption.”

“Wait, why would……”

“Perhaps it was for it to be better capable of adapting to the humans of this world. Sephira crystals weren’t things of this realm to begin with. Preserving such a state would erode the human body to a great degree.”

“Ha……?”

Tohka’s nonchalant tone translated to merely stupefaction in Shidou.

“W-Wait a moment. I don’t follow. The First Spirit wanted to make Sephira crystals more suitable for people……? What’s that supposed to mean!?”

Shidou could not help but stand straight and seize her shoulders, reiterating his enquiry.

With an incensed expression, Tohka grabbed hold of the collar of Shidou’s shirt and hoisted him up.

“Guh… Ack…!?”

“Don’t lose your sense of measure, measly human. My statements did not stem from your request but from no more than a simple whim.”

Her gaze honed in on him, and the grip on Shidou's shirt stiffened incessantly.

"Hmph, weakling. If I'm going to do it anyway, why don't I steal your lips right here right now. That bitch. This would be the fastest way to end things."

Tohka laid hold of his chin with her other hand, taking her time to inch nearer and nearer.

"H-Hey, Tohka……!?"

Shidou squealed out of exigency.

Tohka then expelled a puff of air, vapidly turning her face away.

"——As if, you imbecile. Something of this pointless sort won't make your heart yield."

But in that instant.

"——Haaaah!"

Alongside that shriek appeared a glister out of the corner of Shidou's eyes. At that moment, Tohka released her firm grasp, and Shidou's body dropped to the ground as a result.

"……Cough! Cough, cough……"

Shidou struggled to suspire as he raised his head, only to find Mukuro presently standing before him. Her expression vehemently sanguinary, she tightly clasped the key angel <Michael> in her hands.

"Fie! How darest thou lay thy filthy hands on Nushi-sama……!"

"……Hmph, it has nothing to do with you."

Issuing a somber reply, Tohka stared back at Mukuro with a sepulchral look.

"What say thou!?"

But Mukuro showed not even the tiniest shred of timidity——It would be more precise to illustrate her as having been sparked ablaze, her face dyed with shades gloomier than indignant wrath. She grabbed Tohka like she did Shidou, by the front of her shirt.

"W-Wait, Mukuro! I'm alright, so——"

Shidou took it on himself to obviate disaster immediately. However, all heed was soon lost from Mukuro and ousted by a glare overflowing with unshakeable killing intent at Tohka.

“Art thou conniving to crib Nushi-sama from Muku’s side? To reave Muku of he whom Muku loves, who loves Muku?”

“Like I give a damn, annoying. Let go of me, you wretch.”

Tohka shouted unpleasantly as she sliced down with her right hand.

A small cut appeared on Mukuro’s face, with the grazed nip of her skin soared through the air.

“————”

Mukuro’s breathing froze still as the girl’s hold of Tohka’s shirt slackened.

Even so, this did not imply that she had been petrified by Tohka’s act of aggression. She made no effort to wipe the blood gushing out of her cheek, simply watching the few strands of golden hair cascading onto the ground in a faux-stupor.

“Ah——a-ah……”

Mukuro widened her eyes and shouted.

Then.

“——Thou…… Thou caitiff————————!”

The next split second, Shidou’s vision brightened beyond understanding.

Tohka’s body was blown away, being defenestrated out of the glass windowpanes of the lookout tower and into mid-air.

“……Huh! Uah……!?”

Against the jagged fragments of the shattered window, Shidou could only bend his body down in circumvention, but he soon raised his head up again.

——The observation post was in the twinkling of an eye, thrown into outright chaos and disarray in every respect. All the visitors in the area screamed and cried, scrambling towards the central elevator in a frenzy.

This was nevertheless to be expected. After all, the fragile glassware had been demolished just like that, and a girl had been sent flying——

On top of that, the girl herself and the other girl who had sent her flying were currently standing on the outer wall of the tower, unperturbed.

“You bitch.”

“——Un-forgivable ……unforgivable, unforgivable, unforgivable……”

Mukuro, who had already manifested <Michael> some time ago, and Tohka were now poised in confrontation at the exterior structure of the building.

Both parties defied gravity, positioned exactly perpendicular to the vertical plane of the wall.

Of course, they themselves felt no ounce of incoherence at their aberrant feat. The two emanated murderous purports.

“Put asunder…… Muku’s hair. Nushi-sama——extolled by Nushi-sama……

Muku’s… hair——”

As Mukuro was glaring daggers at Tohka, she seemed to be chanting something.

Her body was enshrouded with scintillating particles of light, which commingled into an external garment that divaricate a gently undulating glow.

——Astral Dress: the absolute armor of a Spirit.

“……! Mukuro! Stop it! Tohka didn’t mean to——”

Shidou yelled in vain as Mukuro had utterly deafened her ears to any outside noise. She applied force to the hand clutching <Michael>.

At once, she transfixed her own chest with the front tip of <Michael>.

“What……!?”

“<Michael>——<Release-Shifuru>.”

Mukuro turned the key.

In that instant, her Astral Dress diffused a blinding radiance——and its outward form underwent a transmutation. Its graceful, elegant appearance profoundly twisted, turning into a mirroring paragon of her furious outrage and high dudgeon.

Simultaneously, the <Michael> in her hand transfigured too. The key-shaped angel was recast into a prolonged halberd.

If her previous Astral Dress and Angel were that of a goddess, then her present attire would resemble that of a savage warrior.

This was by no means a Sephira crystal inversion. However, from the moment Mukuro became that way, concentrated, murky reiryoku dissipating from her had begun to ripple the surrounding air.

“T-This is……!?”

“Mukuro-chan!?”

Shidou’s and Origami’s voices overlapped.

“Hoho?”

But there was one among them who brimmed with intrigue and narrowed her eyes——Tohka.

“——Very well. The fight for the kiss ends here. Doing it this way is far clearer and simpler.”

Subsequently, a coal-black Astral Dress emblazoned Tohka’s figure, and the Demon King <Nahemah> materialized in her hand.

“Sore, sore, unforgivable! Return to naught!”

“Well then. Bring it on. I’ll personally hack off that head of yours.”

Mukuro vs. Tohka.

A Spirit possessing cosmic power opposed the Inverse Spirit

Chapter 10: The Key and the Sword

On board the bridge of the airship Fraxinus, the main monitor displayed a view of the lookout post atop of Tenguu Tower, with shards of glass flying out everywhere. At the same time, a fierce alarm erupted from the speakers.

“……!? This is——”

“Two strong Spirit waveforms have been detected! One of them shows values of Category E!”

"What……!?"

After hearing <Deep Love> Minowa’s words, Kotori knitted her eyebrows.

Spiritual wave reaction, Category · E. In other words, rather than a normal Spirit reading, an entity endowed with the spirit power of an Inverse Spirit had appeared.

Despite that, the present situation was not completely unexpected. After all, Tohka, who had inverted, should currently be in the observatory.

No——using the preposition *in* would have been inappropriate.

On the primary screen, two Spirits leisurely stood upright against the glass curtain wall, their lengthy windswept hair dancing in the breeze.

“……!”

As Kotori’s attention was focused on the monitor, another loud noise reverberated in the bridge once again.

It was the echo of a piercing, blood-curdling siren that roiled the surrounding air.

However, it didn’t originate from the ship itself. The spacequake alarm was issued only after observing the spirit power of the two.

Usually, the spacequake alarm was sprung by observing the spatial fluctuations that occur when Spirits from the neighboring world appear in this world.

Of course, in this country, the AST would not let these abnormal spirit wave readings go unnoticed.

The crowd on the street immediately dispersed. Everyone was in a hurry to evacuate to the nearby shelter.

“Kuh……”

Kotori glimpsed at the scene reflected on the main display before making a frustrated face while clenching her fist.

<Ratatoskr> was an organization aimed at saving Spirits. They could not just sit back and watch this emergency unfold.

However, nothing came to Kotori’s mind as she tried to concoct a specific method to solve the present situation. The usage of Fraxinus’ weapons and CR-units might be able to suppress the runaway Spirits, but it would be no different from DEM's and AST’s deplorable methods. Afterwards, unless they managed to deal with the power of the Spirits manually, the problem would be dragged out further.

However, it was impossible to seal the spiritual power of the Spirit, no matter how they utilized the capabilities of Realizer devices. If so, Kotori and the others had until now——

“Well….”

——Something was missing. Kotori frowned at the pain suddenly stabbing at her head.

It resembled a highly complex puzzle that was missing a vital component.

Without that missing part, it would be very difficult to piece together.

"! Commander!"

As Kotori was thinking back and forth in a circle, she was snapped back into reality after one of the crew members called out to her.

In the deck of the observation post, the battle between the pair began when they both kicked off the ground ——no; rather, it was when they stomped the wall. The two of them had already been ignoring gravitational force the moment they started fighting.

One of them was wearing a dark Astral Dress and holding a single-edged sword ——the Inverse Spirit, Tohka.

The other person possessed flowing blonde hair, a Spirit who held onto a key-shaped halberd ——if one heeded Origami's words, then that person would appear to be Mukuro.

Both sides were running on the wall while scattering abnormal levels of spiritual power. With each exchange of their weapons, layers of glass coating the observation platform would be destroyed one after another by the aftermath of their spiritual power as sparkling fragments were scattered into the sky.

"…Anyway, we cannot just stand by and watch. At least the damage to the surroundings may be——"

Kotori was about to give instructions to the crew, but she was suddenly interrupted.

The sound indicating communication from the external line rang.

"Communication… Where did it come from?"

"A general line——It's coming from Origami's mobile phone!"

"What was that……!? Hurry up and put us through!"

As Kotori issued the command, the sound of Origami's voice resounded from the speaker after a rustle of static noise.

"Kotori-chan…. It's Origami."

"Origami! What have you been doing!? Tohka and… who is that other Spirit!?"

"Sorry, I'll explain later….! Time is running out! Quick, help me! Carrying on like this won't do. Can you stop those two's movements using Fraxinus' territory!?"

"That's…… manageable, but it's impossible to completely suppress a Spirit of such strength. At best it'll only make them feel that their body has become heavier——"

As Kotori was speaking, another voice resonated from the speaker.

The voice did not come from Origami but sounded rather distinctively masculine instead.

"After that, leave it to me…!"

"What……"

Kotori widened her eyes in astonishment.

The voice of the unexpected man originated from Origami's phone, and yet Kotori was surprised by the tranquil feeling from hearing that voice.

"You, what are you talking about? Saying to leave it to you at the end——"

"There's no time to explain every detail. I have a way to stop them, so please believe me. Can you help me?"

"……"

That earnest voice made Kotori fall silent for a moment.

But then.

"….Expand the territory to the area where Tohka and Mukuro are fighting! At the same time, deploy the <Yggdrafolium> to minimize the damage done to the surroundings!"

"Commander!?"

The crew members issued their astonishment. After all, even though it was also part of Origami's request, but for Kotori to actually listen to the words of a strange man…

Yet for some reason, even after Kotori had made the decision, there was a subtle feeling of it being positively *appropriate*. It was as though they had done this before; as if there had been several times where this boy had made the same request; like there had been a few occasions - with his unreasonableness.

Kotori pulled out her Chupa Chups and turned over her jacket before speaking.

"Enough, execute it immediately. This war belongs to us."

"H-How is it, Itsuka-kun?"

Origami turned to face Shidou with an uneasy expression. He nodded his head in response and handed the cell phone back to her.

"Well, they're willing to help us."

"Really? That's great…"

"Well… It's true that having Origami act as the intermediary was a big help."

After Shidou said so, Origami shook her head in response with a fufu sound.

“That’s incorrect. Itsuka-kun was the one who conveyed those words.”

“No, Kotori doesn’t remember me right now.”

Origami once again shook her head to refute his claim.

“Maybe that’s not wrong, but surely it’s not just because of that in this case.

This time she naturally understood your words because you two are brother and sister.

“Is that so…”

Shidou scratched his face after giving a wry smile. He then took a deep breath and slapped his face to regain his concentration.

“But we’re finally at the starting line. We must find a way to stop Mukuro and Tohka. Right now, we don’t even know how Mukuro’s relationship levels are, let alone if establishing the seal through a kiss with the memories still sealed will restore Tohka back to normal… Either way, sink or swim, we can only stake everything on a single chance.”

Shidou clasped his fist and stared back at Origami.

“……Please, I can’t stop the two of them by myself…Can you lend me a hand too?”

“Itsuka-kun……”

Origami gave a slight smile, making a promise of her own.

“Of course, if I let Itsuka-kun go by himself, I’ll certainly be at odds with *myself* later on.”

Origami exclaimed, as she extended her fingers and turned her body to continue.

“And besides… I’m really happy you’d want to rely on me. Being able to accompany Itsuka-kun——Girls don’t get happy just by being protected, you know.”

“Origami……”

As Shidou uttered her name, Origami gazed across his shoulder before directing a mischievous smile towards Shidou. Then, she fished out something which looked

like a silver dog tag from her pocket and held it over her forehead as it chimed a ping of confirmation.

“Approval, Tobiichi Origami. ——<Brynhildr> deployed.”

The next moment, a faint light surrounded Origami’s body, and the elegant silhouette of metallic armor enclosed her frame.

CR-units were the technological culmination of the miraculous invention known as Realizers. It was the only instrument that enabled humans to fight on equal ground against the Spirits.

Not only was she suited up, but Origami had also overlaid the CR-unit <Brynhildr> with a pure white Astral Dress which resembled a wedding gown.

“This is——”

“——Fufu. Have you fallen in love, Itsuka-kun?”

Despite Origami replying in a joking manner, her cheeks glowed with a reddish tint as if she was slightly embarrassed by her own words.

"Well, erm, I didn’t mean it like that."

“Eh, haha….”

After Shidou had slowly loosened his mouth in reaction to the embarrassing retort, he quickly regained his composure by sharpening his gaze.

“——Let’s go, Origami.”

"Yeah…… Itsuka-kun."

As both of them voiced so, they simultaneously stepped into the battlefield.

◇◇◇

——The streets echoed with the hustle and bustle of a turbulent siren.

While looking at the waves of the people rushing towards the refuge shelter, Natsumi wrinkled her brows in bewilderment.

“……The spacequake alarm? That means……”

“Could it be that…… they’re in trouble because of Tohka-san……?”

As if to answer Natsumi’s statement, Yoshino responded in an anxious voice.

Although they had no inclination for thinking so, the possibility was very high.

She nodded her head in consent.

After what had happened, Natsumi was now searching for Tohka and Origami, who had suddenly exhibited drastic changes in their respective personalities. Even though Kotori said to leave everything to her, not a single one of the Spirits could obediently stay silent and wait.

Despite them knowing virtually nothing about what happened to those two, it was obvious that the complication by no means comprised a usual, trivial matter.

The issue was not only centered around Origami acting more forthright and candid than usual. Instead, the main dilemma was Tohka, who, after collapsing from a violent headache, emitted a violent aura as she raised her head.

In spite of the resemblance to the time Nia had inverted, they were still unaware of the reason behind it. But that was——

“Yosshi! Nattsun!”

As she was lost in thought, Natsumi was brought back to reality when she heard someone call out to her.

Bestowing a special, signature nickname was a typical characteristic of Nia.

Looking in the direction of the voice, they saw Nia and the other Spirits, who had also been on the search for Tohka. It seems that they had all convened before coming here.

"What happened, have you found her?”

“No, but it looks like something happened on the other side of Tenguu Tower.

We should go over there to check!”

Nia pointed in the opposite direction from which the flow of people emerged.

Natsumi and Yoshino, after exchanging glances, nodded their heads in agreement

together.

◇◇◇

“Haaaaah!”

“Mere paltry gestures——!”

The key-shaped Angel and the Demon King sword clashed innumerable times.

Concurrently, the discharge of spiritual power behind every impact formed a compact explosion that dilated instantaneously, producing dazzling light and deafening shock waves which spread in all directions.

To boot, the key-shaped angel, <Michael>, having changed its appearance from that of a staff to a halberd’s, was creating numerous miniature *doors* at irregular intervals, launching attacks to target Tohka’s blind spots.

For an ordinary person, it would be unfeasible to catch a glimpse of the flash sparked by a sword swing of such divine swiftness. No——even a Spirit should not be able to deflect the slash. In this regard, both sides were locked in a mutual stalemate. Seeing this, Tohka issued a declaration of faint praise towards her opponent.

Granted that <Michael> could *seal* spirit power, it was only temporarily since the other side boasted the potential to *open* the seal. It seemed to resemble the sublime beauty of a closed flower bud rising into full bloom. Consolidated murderous intent and hostility were directed towards destroying the halberd.

The glass panes of the observation deck that Tohka and Mukuro used as footholds while they fought flew piece by piece in the aftermath of their battle.

Tohka turned around and jumped further to the top of the observation platform ——moving towards the iron section of the tower.

“Dost thou desire to bereave Muku of company? To incite solitude in Muku?”

Mukuro issued a brief groan of lament as she prepared to commence another swift assault not a second later.

“Slay. Slay. Muku shall slay whosoever dares take Nushi-sama from her.”

“Humph! Don’t be all bark and no bite. Try to pierce me with that key, woman. If you can do it, just try.”

“Thy remarks are undue……!”

In response to Tohka’s taunt, Mukuro prepared to utilize <Michael>.

As in concert with that action, Tohka felt a strange sensation dispersing through her body.

It was as if she had been swallowed by an invisible viscous liquid. The weight of her body felt heavier, and it became more and more tiresome to move her limbs.

"……What is this?"

For a moment, she thought it was the work of Mukuro——No. Mukuro also displayed the same sense of immobility. She directed her line of sight towards Tohka with an expression asking, “What did you just do?”

It would appear that neither of them was the culprit. Perhaps the ones behind this were the humans Shidou and Origami…… or one of their collaborators.

However, such an annoyance would not change anything for Tohka. The enemy ought to be annihilated, nothing more.

“Take that!”

It seemed Mukuro had the same idea as Tohka. She kicked upwards to accelerate into the sky and used <Michael> to dispatch an endless barrage of continuous, dense offensives.

Tohka inhaled a small breath and prepared to aim a piercing strike directed at <Michael>’s handle to repel the assault.

“……Hmm?”

Possibly due to being faced with such offence and defense, Tohka slightly scowled.

There was no doubt that each of Mukuro’s blows was besmeared with a power that could merit a fatal blow.

However, what was the best way to describe it. Tohka’s intuition told her that Mukuro would not use this attack to decide the outcome of the battle there and

then.

Any action taken by the other party should also be obstructed by the invisible force, and it was not like Mukuro had no intention to kill Tohka.

It was hard to say——but yes, it felt like she was merely paving the way for the finishing blow.

As Tohka was thinking, Mukuro made a discreet move. Using herculean effort to move <Michael>, she took aim with the intentions to destroy with a piercing attack.

However, it had missed as a result of Tohka taking the precaution to, within the paper-thin difference in time, twist her body to avoid the attack.

But, at the very next moment.

"<Michael>——<Unlock-Rātaibu>."

After Tohka rotated her body to avoid <Michael>, Mukuro used her angel to open a *door* behind Tohka.

"——Tsk."

For an instant, she thought an attack would burst from that door——yet that was not the case.

The *door* began to breathe as it sucked in the surrounding air.

Tohka, who was standing near the steel tower, was thrown into the sky.

Maybe the other side of the 'door' was connected to a space with a large pressure difference.

Although Mukuro predicted that this would not be enough to suck Tohka in whole, it presented nothing more than a chance to strike at a vulnerable opening——.

"<Unlock-Rātaibu>!"

Hearing Mukuro shout interrupted Tohka's thought process.

The huge *door* that had opened in front of Tohka must have been at least a hundred meters in diameter. It sucked in all the nearby lumps of iron, stone, wood, along with any other polymers composing the structure.

"Chi——"

Perhaps the gravitational pull was strong enough to even attract a massive building. Tohka fixed her posture holding <Nahemah> and directed her blade towards the edifice.

In a single slash, the sword severed the building precisely like a line. The two halves avoided Tohka and fell to the ground.

But at that moment.

“<Michael>——<Solution-Jerez>!”

Just after noticing the door between the large sliced buildings that Tohka had recently precipitated, a key-shaped halberd stabbed outwards from within it.

“————”

Having already prepared herself for another sword swinging stance, even if she had turned around, it would be too late.

As the spear end of <Michael> was about to impale Tohka, it pierced through a wedge of the building that was falling.

Then——

"What……?"

Tohka frowned instinctively.

The huge constructions surrounding Mukuro, as well as Tohka’s Astral Dress, were instantly annihilated.

Even though it had been torn apart, it was not engulfed by the *door* - it just vanished into thin air from the spot.

Nevertheless, time would not wait for their consideration. As the *door* continued to enlarge, from there, Mukuro continued to launch a relentless raid of attacks using <Michael>.

“Hah!”

“These useless acts of yours…!”

Tohka defended against <Michael>’s onslaught while moving out of the way by

riding the momentum.

After landing on the ground, she summoned again the Astral Dress which had been entirely erased moments ago.

That being said, the Astral Dress had yet to be completely restored to its original state. Even for a Spirit, creating an Astral Dress that served as an absolute fortress required a considerable amount of spirit power. The fact that the Astral Dress was lost without lowering the input power meant that the aggregate amount had been shaven down.

"……"

As Tohka was monitoring Mukuro's movements without hesitation, she felt the remnants of spiritual particles in her surroundings.

"The spirit power which constituted my Astral Dress remains in the air——this is not utter destruction. It seems to me that key can disintegrate molecules and spirit particles. I see, so this is your trump card."

"……"

Mukuro did not answer but matched her field of vision to Tohka on the ground.

In response, Tohka postured herself to use <Nahemah> in a perfunctory manner.

In front of her stood a worthy opponent.

Even though her emotions were coated with murderous notions, Tohka could still calmly look into her opponent's gap——That's right, if one must say, it was nerve racking because she was so calm.

"——Humph. You make up a decent fighter, even with your childish face."

After giving a thin smirk, Tohka turned <Nahemah> to point towards her cutely worthy rival.

However, just before the two were about to cross weapons again.

"Wait, you guys!"

"Please, you two, calm down!"

Shidou and Origami appeared between them.

Tohka pouted her lips in displeasure as she re-gripped her grasp on <Nahemah>'s hilt.

"Have you come to block my way? ……Well, whatever. I already intended to defeat everyone!"

Tohka gave a loud roar as she swung down <Nahemah>, the jet-black sword drawing forth a crescent moon-shaped arc towards Mukuro and the two people who had come to interfere.

However, Origami, who was wearing both a metallic armor and her limited Astral Dress, massed the black spirit power to the tip of her spear before dissipating Tohka's attack.

"……What?"

Tohka narrowed her eyes at the unexpected phenomenon.

She was not entirely surprised that Origami could deflect that blow. Right now, Tohka's movements were restricted by some mysterious power; so naturally, it was not a serious release of her sword swing. Also, if Origami had been using the power of a Spirit, it would not have been strange for her to be able to block the attack.

However, it was evident that Origami was carrying the same type of fragrance as Tohka——in other words, the so-called inverse spirit power.

The sensation Origami exuded was similar to the spirit power enveloping Tohka right now.

Perhaps the tip of the spear could accumulate the spiritual pressure drifting around the vicinity. After all, the high output should be reasonable owing to the abundant quantity of spirit particles composing her Astral Dress, which had been broken down by Mukuro.

"Hmm…… this one's good, that too——"

Tohka honed her range of sight as she heaved <Nahemah> over her head.

Then, she kicked off the ground to leap into the air.

"——You can keep me entertained!"

"……! She's coming! Itsuka-kun, I'll leave you to deal with Mukuro-chan!"

As Origami shouted, the dark spirit power surrounding the tip of her spear formed a barrier to protect Shidou from Tohka's attacks.

Tohka, who was adorned in a black Astral Dress, and Origami, who donned a white one, both flew into high altitude as they exchanged mutually intertwining blows.

Looking at the scene from the ground, Mukuro grumbled something in a subtle voice.

"Slay…… Slay. Aught, who would pilfer Nushi-sama, are adversaries.

Muku… Muku disrelishes… loneliness."

"Mukuro!"

"……!"

After suddenly hearing her name being mentioned, Mukuro turned her eyes to the direction of the voice.

"——Nushi-sama."

Exactly. In front of Mukuro was none other than Itsuka Shidou.

"O-Oh…… Nushi-sama, Nushi-sama. Stay assured, for Muku will return that wench to naught. Thereafter——"

"Mukuro!"

In order to interrupt her, Shidou grabbed Mukuro by her shoulders and once again shouted her name out. Mukuro couldn't help but be afraid after seeing such a desperate look.

"What be the matter, Nushi-sama? Entrust everything to Mukuro."

"That's not right…… It shouldn't be like that, Mukuro……! Stop this. I don't want Tohka to disappear or Origami to forget about me. I'd really hate that……! Both of them are….. no, everyone is precious to me!"

"……"

Listening to Shidou's words, Mukuro's body convulsed as though she had just choked on her breath.

However, Shidou resumed without noticing Mukuro's condition.

"Why…… Why? Please tell me, Mukuro. Why are you trying to eliminate everyone?"

Shidou remarked at the end of his tether as he pleaded.

Mukuro replied with a trembling voice from her throat.

"——Why."

"Huh?"

"Why doth Nushi-sama speak such vocables? Loves…… Nushi-sama Muku not? Muku loves Nushi-sama withal. Doth that not suffice? Yet wherefore!?

Wherefore!!"

Mukuro paid no attention to the tears brewing in her eyes.

"Muku loathes this, Muku wishes not to be alone……! Be it Nushi-sama or whosoever——"

"——Tohka-san! Origami-san!"

At that point, as if to interrupt Mukuro, a voice appeared from an unknown location.

"W-Why are those two fighting each other……!"

"Kya——! What a disaster——!"

"——"

Six girls appeared unexpectedly.

They were the Spirits whose memories should have been *locked* by Mukuro using her angel. With a confused face, they all looked up to the sky, watching the fight between Tohka and Origami.

"What——"

Looking at those girls, Mukuro felt as if her heart had just tightly contracted.

"All of you forbye…… Ye have come to snatch Nushi-sama away from Muku?

Unforgivable. Unforgivable! No longer——”

Her head was spinning around, while a nauseous feeling spread through her body.

Mukuro placed her two hands on <Michael> as she turned its tip——

“<Michael>—— <Lock-Segva >!”

Towards the ground——no, she inserted the key towards the Earth and turned it around.

At that moment, with that location as the epicenter, vigorous earthquakes started to propagate through the periphery.

For the people who were standing there, it gave the impression of being near an industry-scale drilling machine.

It was as if the Earth had transformed into some sort of planetary creature that was pulsating.

The tremors began to encompass the nearby surroundings.

“…Tsk!? Wa, what!?

“……W-What’s going on!?”

“Predicament. Is this an earthquake?”

Shidou and the Spirits were stunned by the loud noise ringing their eardrums.

Mukuro gave out a gentle smile as she stroked Shidou’s face with her hand.

“No longer…… need thou worry. With this…… none shall pester us.”

“Mukuro……? What did you just do?”

“——To this Earth, <Lock-Segva> hath been cast. Howbeit, a few ticks of the clock seem to be of necessity in the wake of its vastness, albeit in ultimatum, this celestial body shall cease all motion.”

“What?”

Shidou was momentarily stunned as he stumbled on his words. However, Mukuro did not appear to notice Shidou’s expression, her smile becoming more unnerving as she continued to speak.

“Thus, all beings which cumber will perish. Nushi-sama shall with Muku bear company in the cosmos for aye. Hehe…… What eagerness.”

“What are…… you saying——”

The color of Shidou’s facial expression was that of complete bafflement.

Mukuro did not worry about his facial expression——That’s right, there was one more enemy that she could not let anyone else defeat.

“Hey, Mukuro! Wait!”

While listening to Shidou’s voice from her back, Mukuro looked up at the black shadow in the sky and kicked the trembling ground.

“Kya——! It’s an earthquake——! I’m scared——! Natsumi shield activated—

—!”

“Aren’t you still able to brief the situation leisurely……!”

Natsumi shoved away Miku, who was using the seismic episode as an excuse to hug her…… Needless to say, the differences in physical and mental strength rendered any resistance useless.

However, now was not the time to be concerned with that event. After all, Origami and Tohka were fighting an intense battle in the sky; the spacequake alarm was ringing ceaselessly; and there was the mysterious trembling of the ground. They didn’t even know what to do first in this situation.

"W-What on Earth should be done……?"

“Well….although I’m not really on top of things, right now it’s not okay to not stop Orimin from fighting with Toka.

"Agreement. If this continues, it will be noticed by AST and DEM——"

“——Everybody!”

At this time, they all suddenly heard a distant voice. The Spirits looked in the direction of that voice.

"……Eh?"

After looking at the figure of the person who stood there, they all stared

unexpectedly.

It was a natural reaction. After all, it was the strange boy who had cried out yesterday.

“You…you’re the person from yesterday……?”

"……Eh, to be able to stalk us even when the spacequake alarm is going off, some people would be impressed. Ah, but I won’t feel touched by it.”

Natsumi responded with her eyes half-closed as a boy was running towards the group in a panicked state.

Sensing the alarm in everyone’s eyes, the boy lowered his head.

“Everybody … please! Please lend me your power!”

“……Ha? Eh, what……?”

At the sudden request, the Spirits all formed puzzled expressions on their faces.

"Er…… What happened?"

Despite bearing a confused look, Yoshino still felt the need to say that. Truly, she had to be a goddess with a heart filled with affection in order to be this gentle towards a complete stranger.

Then, the boy lifted his face.

“Mukuro——that Spirit who turned her key to the earth. If this goes on, it’ll become a huge disaster! Please… everyone… lend me your strength!”

Just like this, the young man continued his desperate plea.

But…… Natsumi frowned in response. That's right. First of all, the meaning of that boy’s words was still unknown. Apparently, he knew well about the Spirits, yet this fact merely made him sound even more suspicious.

——However.

“……I understand if you can’t believe in me.”

After a little hesitation, Yoshino nodded her head. Natsumi opened her eyes and glanced at that direction.

“Y-Yoshino? Wouldn’t it be better to approach with more consideration? I guess

it's too suspicious like this…”

“Yes…… but he doesn’t look like a bad person. Though I’m not sure how to put it, I, uh—— want to be able to become this person’s strength.”

Yoshino’s eyes brimmed with firm determination as she shook her head.

Afterwards, the other Spirits started to agree one by one too.

“Kaka, so be it. At least he seems to apprehend the minimal amount of manners.”

“Approval. For some reason, I presume this has happened before."

“Mu…… Well, if all of you say that…… A boy is a boy, but when you trim it a bit you’d look pretty cute.”

“Ah——didn’t it work out in the end? Something like this really gets your blood fired up.”

“Everyone……”

The young boy wiped his faintly moist eyes.

Natsumi seemed to feel slightly embarrassed, taking in a deep breath.

“……What. This makes me seem like the only bad guy here? I understand; I'll follow along as well——What are we supposed to do first?”

As Natsumi finished, a jubilant expression surfaced on the face of the boy—

—then, suddenly his body stopped moving.

"Well, that’s——"

Apparently, he had not even considered what to do first. Natsumi once again breathed out a sigh.

At that moment…

“——Really, what are you guys doing.”

Although they couldn’t verify the source, they had all heard Kotori’s voice.

“! Kotori-san!?”

“Eh, from where?”

“I’m transmitting my voice through <Fraxinus>’s Territory system. ——Just like that boy said, the ground is being corroded by spirit power. Although we’re unaware of what will happen to the Earth, we can’t just leave it alone.

——For now, we’ve designated six different locations as the starting points with the <Yggdrafolium>. If you start sending your Reiryoku to those points, we may be able to delay the corrosion of the ground for a while.”

"Huh, I see. That’s incredible, Kotori. Be my family.”

"That won’t be necessary. ——It will only be able to delay it for a while.

Unless we do something about the Spirit and Angel who caused this, the problem will still persist. ——Can we really can leave it to you, Itsuka Shidou?”

After Kotori ended her question, the young man nodded his head in confirmation.

"Ah…… Thank you so much, everyone, I’m really grateful."

After finishing, the boy turned his back to everyone and began to head out.

Seeing this action, Natsumi asked another question.

"……Where are you going?"

Without looking back, the boy answered.

"To that place, where a child is waiting for my hand."

◇◇◇

On the ground that continued to vibrate slightly.

“Nushi-sama——Muku shall concede not.”

Mukuro sharpened her range of sight as she gazed at Origami and Tohka exchanging mutual blows in the sky.

Towards Tohka, who was currently preoccupied with fighting Origami, it was certainly possible for Mukuro to take advantage of the situation to launch a successful attack from behind.

“<Michael>——<Unlock-Rātaibu>!”

As Mukuro shouted, she used her hands to turn <Michael>. At that moment, a 'door' appeared, wherein the front tip of <Michael> could barely fit.

Of course, the other side of the *door* was connected to a blind spot of Tohka’s. ——There, <Michael> would pierce and turn. In that case, everything would be over. <Solution-Jerez>, <Michael>’s secret ability to ensure the total decomposition of any material matter. In front of this unparalleled power, all things in this world would return to nothingness. At this point, even Tohka should be no exception.

“<Solution-Jerez>……!”

After Mukuro spotted the timing where Origami and Tohka were distracted by their clash, a small key-shaped angel would protrude out into the space from a *door*.

However——

“Don’t do it! Mukuro!”

Just as <Michael> was about to pierce through the *door*, Shidou stood up and spread out his hands in front of Mukuro.

“——!?”

Due to the unexpected action from Shidou, Mukuro gawked blankly with her eyes as her body began to tremble.

But it was too late. Through the reflexes of her wrist, <Michael> slightly deviated from its target as it pierced through Shidou’s shoulder.

“Kuh……!?”

Shidou’s face distorted with pain. In response, Mukuro quickly used her arms to stop the influx of power being unleashed by <Michael>.

But.

“————Eh?”

At the next instant, as if hit by a strange sensation, Mukuro let out a stunned voice.

By piercing Shidou with the long halberd, phantom-like images began to manifest, with feelings of undiluted anger that flowed through. No, to be more precise, there

was also something flowing from Mukuro's side.

Although they didn't know what it was in the end; however, it seemed as if the feelings between Mukuro and Shidou were being intermingled. It was like the feeling of shaking two different liquids within a bottle together.

Ah——but it wasn't the first time she encountered this feeling. Exactly. At that time in outer space, the same feelings brewed when Shidou had used his pseudo <Michael> to pierce her.

"——"

——That's right, at that time.

——

That cold winter day.

In the face of my own frustration, certain existence appeared.

It bore semblance to someone who was fully submerged in water, or a strange figure enshrouded in mosaics.

And that *someone* had given me something resembling a gemstone with a brilliant golden hue.

From that moment onwards, I, ——Hoshimiya Mukuro, became a Spirit.

However, I felt neither doubts nor fears.

No, rather it would be more appropriate to say that I felt an even greater feeling of joy.

I had received <Michael>, a key-shaped angel which could *close* any object—

—even invisible things such as human memories could be locked.

Using this power, I could certainly make sister, father, and mother love only me.

So, I immediately, and gladly, used this power. Opening a door in space, I utilized <Michael> to *close* the memories of my family from every acquaintance, or nearly anyone that recognized my sister and parents for that matter.

——However, in the end, things did not go as I had planned.

After coming back home, the reactions of my family were filled with utter

confusion. The unusual situation of having no one remember them left a sense of overwhelming bewilderment; nobody was concerned about Mukuro.

I believed that if all the surrounding people were to forget about them, they would all love me again.

Yet, the backlash from my family after discovering that I had been the cause of the situation was far from love or affection.

Astonishment and anger; dismay and agitation; and also——rejection.

Father, Mother, and sister were all afraid of how I obtained such unfathomable power and thereafter alienated me.

Not much was to be reminisced with regard to what they had said subsequently. In spite of being able to recall the scene as vividly as it had occurred, only fragmented words came and disappeared.

“Monster”, “Ah, what did you do”, “Don’t kill”, “Get out”, “You’re——not our family”.

Evidently, perhaps the brain had judged that my heart would be unable to bear the burden of all those memories, so they were specifically frayed and tattered in this manner.

Even so, I could clearly remember the painful knot in my chest at that time.

Uncomfortable, sad, painful, and lonely, ——these feelings spun around constantly in my head. And so, I went to Father, Mother, and sister, using <Michael> to lock each and every single memory of myself.

——Because it seemed as though something would have happened if those words had plagued me any longer.

And thus, I was alone again.

Though it was by no means the same——I returned to loneliness after having experienced the warmth of a family. It cruelly mirrored starving a man who had known satisfaction all too well.

In retrospect, I likely possessed no qualifications to ever love something in the first place.

Being born without love, I failed to notice how its shape had contorted.

If you love, you must also be loved.

If you love, you must look within solely yourself.

Therefore, Mukuro closed the lock.

To my memories.

To my heart.

In order not to recall the warmth of a family after having felt it once.

——In order to never love something again.

——

“Ah——”

In front of the door opened in space, Shidou let out a small voice that sounded unusual of someone who just had <Michael> stabbed into his shoulder.

Remarkably, it was not that painful. Rather, via <Michael>, the memory of a girl came flowing into him.

It was the dream that Shidou had been watching for the last few days.

And——it was probably the memories that Mukuro had sealed.

Thinking about it, Shidou had only dreamed that after he had used his pseudo <Michael> to open the lock on Mukuro’s heart in outer space.

Although he was oblivious to its specific principles, but perhaps at that time, the seal locking Mukuro’s memories collapsed, allowing her recollections to be relayed through <Michael> and into Shidou.

Then, again by means of <Michael>, the memory was shared between the two of them.

“Mukuro…… you’re, no, you too are——”

Shidou imparted a small voice while trembling and reaching out to Mukuro.

But at the next moment.

“Ah, gah……!?”

Shidou now perceived a severe pain in the region where <Michael> had struck. From his shoulder down to his wrist, everything had snapped and ricocheted like a bullet.

"Ou… ugh, gaaaaaaaah??"

As a result of the pain from the shock, Shidou gave out a scream as if his throat had been crushed.

It was a completely distinct feeling in comparison to having his hand cut off.

His shoulder disappeared as though denying it had ever been there. What remained of his wrist fell to the ground over a large pool of blood.

"Ga … ah, aaaaaah!"

Shidou reflexively used the Angel of music, <Gabriel>. He employed the spirit power in his voice to increase his resilience in order to withstand the bleeding and torment.

At the same time, Shidou called on <Haniel>, even though it was at a pitiable level, to close the wound…. Had Mukuro used <Michael> to seal away his ability to use <Haniel>, he would have been incapable of doing anything.

Fortunately, it seemed that only <Haniel>'s ability to transform into <Michael> had been closed.

Of course, despite giving the impression of water on rocks, it only had a minor effect——at least it prevented him from going crazy owing to the anguish or losing consciousness.

Even with <Camael>'s healing flames generating smoke on the wound, it was uncertain if it could cure a trauma of such magnitude. It would take more time if possible, as even now the effect still hadn't kicked in.

Shidou's face was covered in sweat as he looked towards Mukuro.

"Mu-… -kuro——"

"Ah… A-Ah——Nushi-sama, nay……! Muku, Muku wished not to kill Nushi-sama……"

But looking at the sky with empty eyes, Mukuro's body began to quiver with fear. She dropped <Michael> down from her arms and started talking in incoherent words.

“Nay…… Forsake Muku not…… a-a-a-ah, Nushi-sama, Ane-sama……

Muku, Muku……”

Like a dream, memories and reality began to jumble in her mind. Mukuro held her head tightly in confusion.

The next moment, tears dripped from Mukuro’s eyes. A torrent of spirit power of a muddy color began to emanate from her body.

"Ugh—— a-aaaaaaaaaargh!——"

“This is……”

Shidou squeezed out a hoarse voice.

He was no stranger to this phenomenon. ——Inversion.

The fact that she had, by her own hand, caused a mortal injury to Shidou, and—— simultaneously recovered the memories that she herself closed in her mind.

Certainly, these factors were enough for engulfing Mukuro’s heart in an abyss of despair.

Crimson cracks appeared on the elegant and valiant Spirit, taking on a color that embodied chaos itself. The flowing tears transformed into pitch black darkness, and <Michael>, which had fallen to the ground, dissipated into dust. Then, a large demonic key began to appear behind Mukuro.

“No, please…… Stop, Mukuro!”

If this subsisted any further, Mukuro would really invert.

Shidou slowly stepped forward with staggering feet.

However, Mukuro’s body lay at the very center of a potent vortex of spiritual power that stopped Shidou’s advancement and pushed him back in retaliation.

“Guh——!”

In his current condition, it was arduously difficult to avoid the attack.

Somehow, he managed to endure the blow by focusing all of his strength to his feet.

At the next moment, a tremendous slash fell from above, dissipating the spirit

power in front of Shidou like foggy mist.

“Eh——?”

Shidou started blankly at the sight. At first, he thought it was assistance provided by <Fraxinus>——but that was wrong. This was from <Nahemah>.

“Humph.”

While in thought, Shidou heard a voice coming from the sky.

“Don’t misunderstand. As to why I humiliated myself for a bastard like you, such an easy death would be unsuitable even for the likes of you."

Tohka gave an annoyed expression before once more facing against Origami in the sky.

“Tohka……”

Shidou whispered for a moment before turning to face Mukuro.

Tohka’s words likely didn’t contain any especial implications. But it was an indisputable fact that her blow had paved the way for him. Shidou couldn’t save her by himself, so he thanked Tohka for providing him with the opportunity to reach Mukuro. While taking small footsteps, he reached out his remaining hand to hold Mukuro.

His body could muster only a bit more power. It would be more accurate to say that he was leaning forward rather than embracing her. ——Yet that didn’t matter. Shidou gathered the strength in his throat to say something.

“Mukuro! Mukuro! Come back! No, you can’t go over there!’

Shidou was using the last ounce of strength in his body to talk to Mukuro.

——Shidou had not understood it before.

The reason for why Mukuro wanted to exclude everyone and monopolize Shidou.

As a matter of fact, jealousy, alongside the desire to keep someone for oneself, was a feeling which everybody had. However, in Mukuro’s case, the extent was way beyond the level of ordinary.

Nonetheless, speaking of the present.

Through Mukuro's memories that were shared by <Michael>, Shidou now understood.

Because——

"Mukuro…… you're——me."

Shidou continued to talk to Mukuro, who was enveloped in darkness.

Yes, Mukuro and Shidou were extremely similar to each other. That's why Shidou had first thought that the dream of Mukuro's past was rather of his own past.

In the past, Shidou had been abandoned by his mother and had become caught in loneliness.

Yet, when he was adopted by the Itsuka family——father, mother, a little sister ——for the first time, he also understood the warmth of a family.

Therefore, he could comprehend.

"Mukuro…… You were actually worried inside. You were in distress, yet you didn't know what to do, right?"

Mukuro's shoulders began to convulse after she heard Shidou's hoarse voice.

Precisely, Mukuro felt uneasy.

Because in the beginning of her memory, the existence named 'love' was absent.

One day, all of a sudden, she was given a warm, tender feeling that was comfortable and dazzling while not knowing how to cling onto it.

It truly sent forth the sensation of a dreamlike, ethereal existence, instigating, unbeknown to them, the fear of losing everything when the dreamer themselves awakens into reality.

Even when immersed in happiness, there would always linger a trace of anxiety within oneself.

So, if one's family were to consort with someone other than oneself, one would learn that they belonged to an unfamiliar world. The feeling of one's heart being tightened would undoubtedly be enkindled.

After all, there was the thought that he was a human grafted into their lives; there might be other things that those people deem more valuable.

Although it wasn't as excessive as Mukuro's instance, this sentiment also existed within Shidou's own heart.

"But, Mukuro…… Don't worry about it."

With blurred vision, Shidou continued to speak as he stroked Mukuro's head.

"You don't need to worry about it. Father, mother, brothers and sisters…… no matter how far apart, you'll always be linked together. Because——that's what family is."

Yes, he was taught that by Kotori and his parents.

But if Shidou was given the same power as Mukuro, he wouldn't know what he might have done either.

"……uh"

As a result of what Shidou said, Mukuro exhaled a small breath.

"But…… Muku… to Muku… hath…"

"……You'll still have me!"

To answer Mukuro's faint consciousness, which seemed like it could possibly disappear at any moment, Shidou raised his voice.

"I will be… your family, so you don't have to worry anymore. No matter what, I'll never forget you. No matter what you do, I'll never hate you…"

Despite coughing fiercely and blood spewing from his mouth, Shidou did not care and continued to speak.

"Ah…… that's not all. Mukuro, you too… Promise me… There's no point in one-way love. ——Because we're… a family."

"……! Nushi-sama, Muku——"

Muku responded with her lips slightly trembling.

Then, at that moment the tears, which were murky like sludge, returned to its original transparency.

However, it wasn't over yet. The spirit power surrounding them was increasing in momentum.

It was now the critical juncture to determine whether Mukuro could entirely return to their side.

“Mukuro——”

He didn’t know if Mukuro had accepted his words. However, there was no time left to waste. Shidou used the final shred of his energy to lift his face——

“Wha……”

“————”

His lips touched Mukuro’s for an ephemeral moment.

This was a blood-soaked kiss with an odor like metallic iron.

After giving a small prayer, Shidou closed his eyes tightly.

It was a sensation that he had experienced many times before. By establishing the seal, spirit power flowed from Mukuro’s body and into Shidou.

Simultaneously, the Astral Dress that Mukuro was wearing and the key- shaped Demon King lost its radiance, melting away and fading into the air.

“……Mukuro!”

"Ah…… um……”

Having become stark naked, Mukuro abruptly leant over.

However, to Shidou, who had well exceeded his limit, being leant against by Mukuro broke his posture as he collapsed backwards.

“Gua-yah……!?”

He stroked the back of his head strongly, shouting a miserable scream.

But if one were to ask for the root of the shriek, it would mainly be due to the shock from his previous wounds.

Despite using a combination of abilities from <Gabriel>, <Haniel>, as well as <Camael>, for the emergency treatment, under normal circumstances, this would have unquestionably been a fatal injury——Even death would not prove to be unlikely from such affliction. Rather, it should be said that his reaction towards being collapsed upon was commendable, given his condition.

"……."

Perhaps tired from the crying or having exhausted all of her stamina, Mukuro sent a yawn yearning for sleep, while her chest was still soaked with Shidou's blood.

Shidou heaved a deep sigh of relief.

"Mukuro… thank you for believing in me……"

Shidou loosened his neck as he caressed Mukuro's head while looking up towards the heavens.

……But how was he to describe it. Shidou then discerned a kind of unspeakably bad feeling.

Obviously, he had just completed a super difficult task, but it was the type of sensation of forgetting something very important.

At that time, as if to verify what Shidou was thinking, something from the sky approached his view at a tremendous speed.

"What……!?"

Shidou opened his eyes wide in astonishment.

As the flying object approached them, it quickly decelerated to land beside Shidou's head quietly.

A dark skirt fluttered in the wind and embraced Shidou's sight.

That's right. It appeared there.

"——Pfft. I thought there was something to see, but in the end, this is the result, woman."

The voice came from the Inverse Spirit Tohka, who should have been in the middle of an aerial battle against Origami.

"To… hka….!"

Shidou held his breath, as he moved to protect Mukuro, who was sleeping on his chest.

"……Thank you. Because… of you… I could… stop… Mukuro……"

"Hmm, I don't care about that. Anyhow, I can now kill two birds with one stone."

Shidou found himself unable to look back as Tohka stared at them with murderous eyes.

Mukuro's spirit power was sealed and she had already lost consciousness.

Likewise, it would be a mistake to assume that Shidou was in any reasonable condition to fight. Both were powerless against Tohka.

"Uck——Are you alright!?"

Falling a few seconds behind Tohka, Origami arrived at a position slightly away.

However, both her limited Astral Dress and CR-Unit displayed signs of damage. It seemed to be a struggle for even Origami to fight against the inverted Tohka.

"……"

Tohka glanced at Origami for a second before returning her attention to Shidou and Mukuro.

Shidou could detect himself exuding cold sweat.

That's right; the supposed assistance earlier was merely one of Tohka's fleeting whims. Only another could save them now. If she felt like it, Shidou and even Mukuro, as well as Origami, would all be killed.

"Kuh……"

Shidou placed Mukuro's body on the ground as gently as possible, before fighting against the nauseating pain to stand up.

The state of his body was beyond being considered as just bad. If one had to choose between a human and a zombie, he more resembled the latter right now.

However, in order to return Tohka to normal, Shidou summoned his strength and slowly raised his body, with one knee still on the ground.

"Guh…… ah, ugh……"

"——Hmph."

Tohka lowered her eyes condescendingly towards Shidou as she looked on with a cold stare. Then, she forcibly grabbed him by the collar.

"Guaa……!?"

“Itsuka-kun!”

Origami hollered a scream as she prepared to attack Tohka.

However, as Tohka glowered at her, Origami stopped in place without warning. At that distance, if Origami acted rashly before Tohka, Shidou’s head would be the first to come off flying.

“……..”

As Tohka looked on towards Shidou, whose countenance exhibited a grimace of suffering, she slowly raised Shidou’s body upwards.

Then, she looked at Mukuro, who was sleeping on the floor, before stating something in a cold voice.

"——You’ve turned such a competent warrior into a child.”

“Guh……”

Shidou saw that there was a glint of ire in her eyes that was staring daggers at him.

However, the next moment, Tohka merely gave a heavy glance and uttered something with an air of loneliness.

“……My interest is gone.”

“Huh——”

After hearing the tone of inverse Tohka’s voice, Shidou could not refrain from being flabbergasted in response.

However, that surprise was then surpassed by an even greater bafflement.

Tohka, while clutching Shidou’s collar, pressed her lips onto Shidou’s without any hesitation.

“Uhmmm…!?”

“Kya——!?”

Shidou and Origami’s voices overlapped as they both issued exclamations of surprise at the same time.

Yet, Tohka did not show any sign of embarrassment as she let go of the hand gripping Shidou’s collar.

"……Ow!"

As Shidou once again fell to the ground on his backside, the subsequent vibrations spread the pain all throughout his body.

Despite his face twisting in pain, Shidou did not take his eyes away from Tohka.

——Tohka's jet-black Astral Dress disintegrated into light particles that were swept with the wind.

Tohka, who looked as cold as ever, had a mysterious look in her eyes as she looked towards Shidou before muttering something.

"Don't let me——"

"Huh……?"

"Don't let *Tohka* feel sad."

She suddenly lost consciousness and fell down onto the ground.

"T-Tohka!?"

Shidou panicked as he saw Tohka's face as she collapsed.

"Muu……"

It was a very steady and gentle sleeping face.

Her facial features had changed back into her everyday expression. Sensing that the tension had left the atmosphere, Shidou breathed out a sigh of relief before falling down limp on his heads and knees.

"Itsuka-kun, are you okay!?"

Having been observing what had transpired, Origami quickly approached him.

Shidou gave a wry smile as he waved feebly.

"Finally…… ah, no, as expected, things have finally settled."

"Yes, that's, ah! Such heavy injuries…… We have to get you treated in the medical Realizer as soon as possible!"

"Ah… that's true. Have Kotori and the others regained their memories? We can't leave Mukuro and Tohka naked here. <Fraxinus> should come quickly from

above……”

Then.

Shidou suddenly stopped speaking.

No, it was semi-mandatory to stop halfway.

——Mukuro had unexpectedly pressed her lips against his on the spot.

“Pffuu… Mu-Mukuro!?”

“……Hehe, in ill-caution lies man’s greatest foe, Nushi-sama.”

As Shidou’s face was flushed red with embarrassment, Mukuro staggered as she showed a bold smile.

“Wh-What are you saying……”

“Had thou not plant’d a kiss on Tohka’s lips just afore?”

“Ehh……”

Listening to what Mukuro had said, Shidou slightly twitched his eyebrows.

He had even thought that Mukuro would have accepted his words. Contrary to what he expected, she had still not given up on monopolizing Shidou——

Mukuro, who had likely read his thoughts, gave out a slight giggle.

“Rest contented. Thou needn’t…… worry more. Whatsoever Shidou aspires, Muku shan’t be at unease. All in all…… we are a family.”

As she said that, her face had a reddish hue to it as though she were a bit shy.

Seeing this, Shidou gave out a short sigh as he loosened his cheeks.

“Mukuro……”

“However.”

Mukuro interrupted Shidou by placing her finger on his lips.

“Such skin ship is verily comely, aye? We are family, if aught.”

She replied with a mischievous smile.

"……U-Um…"

"……Family is… that type of family…"

Shidou started to worry over whether he could take responsibility for his pronouncements.

Epilogue: Reunion Time

Although it was often said that the starry skies incorporated an unreachable realm, Shidou had actually swam in outer space already. In other words, it felt like the body was falling into a quasi-meteor shower. Even if it was by mistake, he still didn't think to capture it in his palm.

After all, the stars were beautiful because they were so far away. While viewing the night sky full of stars spreading in sight, Shidou breathed a light sigh.

A few days after sealing Mukuro's spirit power, Shidou was on the roof of the Spirits' mansion next to the Itsuka residence, gazing at the night sky.

The reason was simple——by Shidou's side laid a sleeping girl who had hoped for this in earnest.

"——Mukuro."

As Shidou called out her name with a soft voice, Mukuro used her fingertips to move her long hair before he became visible in her line of sight.

"Un, what be the matter, Nushi-sama?"

"Is this really okay? If you want to see the stars, Kotori can prepare a better viewpoint for us……"

"Uncalled for, Muku shall henceforth bide hither, nay? Alas, hither accommodates."

"I see."

As Shidou answered shortly, he slowly loosened his mouth and turned to the stellar vaults of heaven again.

Then, while catching glimpses of the twinkling stars, Shidou extended his right hand and tried to open and close his palm several times.

This was not to poetically grasp the stars within his own hand, but merely to confirm if the physical capacities of his right hand had returned to normal.

Even though Shidou's right hand had been, in a sense, demolished on the battlefield, it was finally at the level of its previous dexterity after complete regeneration.

Well, that was to be expected. In order to promptly restore the part that had been lost to such a dire extent, there was no choice but to borrow the power of <Camael> and the medical Realizer apparatus.

However, the acclimation of the treatment, as well as the Mukuro's concealment, were also done as fast as possible. It was thanks to the efforts of those who had regained their memories of Shidou after having those recollections sealed by <Michael>.

If one must say, after seeing his injuries, the Spirits thought, "If only we hadn't forgotten about Shidou, then this wouldn't have ever happened." And so, he had a hard time appeasing the Spirits who kept blaming themselves for letting it transpire in the first place.

In contrast, Mukuro's current state seemed almost deceptively cute as she had listened to Kotori's orders and undergone several medical examinations.

After his treatment and her inspection had been wrapped up today, Shidou saw Mukuro for the first time in a while as she requested to see the stars together.

"——In olden days."

"Eh?"

While scanning the astronomical empyrean above, Mukuro muttered something almost inaudible, causing Shidou to turn his attention towards her.

"Muku oft espied the welkin alongside Ane-sama. Muku… loves such times in sooth."

"Oh… I see."

Shidou was likely thinking the same thing as he quietly replied.

That is to say, Shidou knew that using <Michael> had created a pseudo link between the two of them, allowing their memories to mesh, which he had seen during a dream.

In said dream, Shidou distinguished a feeling of relief coupled with happiness from the bottom of his heart. Surely, it must have been the emotions that Mukuro had memorized at the time.

“Wherefore…… did Muku not perceive it then. Ane-sama, Father, and Mother had all loved Muku.”

“……Mukuro.”

Shidou swayed his neck back and forth before continuing.

"You couldn’t do anything about it. No one wants to be alone. It’s natural that we try to preserve our own place somehow…… I know you just made a little mistake.”

“Nushi-sama……”

Mukuro looked towards Shidou before slowly lowering her eyes.

"Aye…… I faith Nushi-sama bears semblance to Muku. Mayhap thus expounds why…… Muku perceives relief when beside Nushi-sama.”

Mukuro’s expression eased down after finishing that sentence.

Having said that, similar to how he had seen Mukuro’s past by sharing the same dream, it naturally meant that she had also viewed his memories as well. It was then that Shidou felt somewhat bashful, his cheeks turning beet red.

“Hm, say, amongst those visions finds Muku an unfathomable one.”

“Eh, what is it?”

“Wherefore didst thou, whenas singly in thy abode, prop thine arms against thy waist and verbalize, ‘Ougi Roaring Flash Blast Wave’——”

“Ahh, that’s totally unrelated to me. I bet you just dreamt that on your own."

Shidou gave a nonchalant reply as if to shield himself from Mukuro’s words.

Mukuro, feeling strange, moved her neck in thought.

“Hmm… is that so? ……Well.”

While seeming as though she was not fully convinced, Mukuro turned once again to face the sky.

After a passing period of time, the two of them silently returned to their stargazing.

Unaware of how long it had already been, Mukuro uttered below a whisper.

“Ne, Nushi-sama.”

“Un, what’s wrong?”

“Muku’s hair…… Wilt thou aid in trimming it?”

“Huh?”

In response to Mukuro’s words, Shidou widened his eyes.

When Shidou had offered before to cut it…… Mukuro had showcased a strong feeling of refusal. Additionally, the fight against Inverse Tohka had occurred precisely since she had accidently cut a few strands of her hair.

“Is it really fine, Mukuro?”

“Um…… Muku rather wishes for a novel guise.”

Mukuro seemed to reveal a sad smile while having her fingers rolling her long hair forward.

“Needless to vociferate, Nushi-sama shall trim it for Muku, ay? Barring family, none may lay a finger on this hair.”

Then she said that in a joking tone.

Shidou was momentarily stunned but then responded.

“——Ah, leave it to me!"

After nodding, Shidou gently touched Mukuro’s head.

◇◇◇

The clang of the bell to which everyone was accustomed to started ringing throughout the school premises. In the corridors of Raizen High School, students that had been talking with friends began to prepare for class and head towards their respective classes.

“Oh, it’s already time for homeroom. If we don’t hurry up, we’re not going to make it.”

Nearly late, Shidou charged into the classroom while panting. He took off his scarf and using it to fan himself. The usual route to school was frigid as always, though on account of having broken into a run midway, Shidou was sweating a bit.

"Umu, it was dangerous because Origami wanted to get inside Shidou’s jacket in the middle of the road!”

"I am sorry about that matter. I am embarrassed and have no words. I would like to enter a hole if possible.”

After arriving at school, Tohka retorted with her arms crossed. Origami, in a rare display of remorse, decided to bow her head down. However, at the next moment, she drilled her head into the hem of Shidou’s jacket.

"Uwah!?"

"H-Hey! You don’t regret anything, do you!?"

"I just tried to enter because there was a hole. There is nothing wrong."

“A lot of things are wrong!"

Once again, Tohka and Origami began to bicker and quarrel. Shidou slightly sighed and attempted to persuade them to stop.

One month had elapsed since the end of that event. The wreckage of the previous battle had been completely repaired, and Tenguu City also returned to the days as before.

Both Tohka’s and Origami’s mental states have stabilized again.

Of course, <Ratatoskr>, which had lost their base, was looking to rebuild its

headquarters. Likewise, DEM's goal of targeting the Spirits had not changed at all.

But in this way, the city was restored to a tranquil state to the extent that he could enjoy his daily life once more.

There were concerns regarding whether everyone could get along with Mukuro and if she still had some unease. However, Mukuro soon received an "Ahhh! So cute, so cute, so cute ahh! Small and soft, a type that hasn't appeared up until now. Ahhhh!" from Miku. Her habits of familiarizing with the other Spirits occurred faster than expected. Rather, it would be better to say that it was subjected to a sympathetic response… that probably came from being the same victims of the same treatment. Well, it seemed she now kept a vigilant stance against Miku.

"Okay, okay, calm down. It's about time to go to homeroom. Even though we rushed here, we're still going to be late."

"Muu…… Fine. Don't give any more trouble to Shidou."

"Understood."

Shidou got between the two of them and tried to appease the conflict.

Listening to his words, Origami and Tohka obediently agreed to a ceasefire.

Rather, Shidou believed from the bottom of his heart that they became like this due to being on opposite sides.

At that time——Tohka's arrival had been accompanied by spacequakes and Origami had struggled to repel her along with the AST. If one were to view from that perspective, then things haven't really changed.

Mukuro as well——no, every Spirit should be able to understand each other.

However, looking at Tohka and Origami, it seemed like some moral Shidou took out from a dream rather than being a real idea.

"Mu? What's wrong, Shidou?"

"Aren't you going to enter the classroom?"

"Eh? Ah, nothing's wrong. We should hurry."

After hearing both of their words, Shidou made a wry smile as he mumbled.

Shidou rolled up his scarf and entered past the door into Classroom 2-4. He then sat down in his usual seat.

——But then.

"……Eh?"

Shidou unconsciously stopped his pace.

It seemed to be shrouded in an atmosphere that was far above the usual norm.

How was he to describe it? It gave off an obtrusive and uneasy impression from not paying attention to something. As for why, the immediate cause soon became prevalent.

There was a girl sitting right in front of Shidou.

"Wha……”

As he momentarily stopped breathing, the girl appeared to notice that Shidou had discovered her presence. Her eyes and lips were pleasantly raised to a slight degree.

Dark lacquered black hair and perfect ceramic skin. This was not a figure of speech, that is, in these words described a bewitchingly beautiful girl.

"You’re——"

As Shidou emitted flustered voice, the girl's cherry lips turned into a grin and moved.

“——Fufufu. Good day, Shidou-san. I’ve been waiting for a long time.”

“What……”

“Shidou.”

Tohka and Origami immediately responded as if to keep Shidou from moving forward.

However, instead of being cautious of Tohka and Origami, the girl simply laughed merrily.

"My, my, what seems to be the problem? Homeroom is just about to start."

"Don't mess with us! What are you planning?"

"Why are you here?"

Tohka and Origami glared at the girl without letting their guards down. The girl then glanced at Shidou while making strange hand motions as though she was beckoning to him.

"Ufufu. I've decided to come back to school starting today. Please take care of me again, Tohka-san, Origami-san, and——Shidou-san."

The worst Spirit, Tokisaki Kurumi, said so with a smile so gentle yet oozing with insanity.

Afterword

It's been a pleasure to be back after a long time. I am Tachibana Koushi. This time, I presented Date A Live - Volume 15 Mukuro Family; How is it? I'd be delighted if it's to your liking.

With this, Mukuro's latter arc has concluded. Not only that, but a lot of things I always wanted to do have been accomplished and compiled. To be specific, Origami's Combat Realizer Unit + Limited Astral Dress, as well as Mukuro's inversion. I'm extremely content having written out these two aspects of the story. Other than those would comprise a few extra lines such as Mukuro's chest pain.

Then why is the cover of this volume Inverse Tohka?

Originally, I had planned for Mukuro's inverted appearance to be on the cover, but for the purpose of added shock effect, the current cover was adopted instead. And, somehow, it gives off an inexplicable moe sense——'Thanks for meeting you'——such a pose. Really cute.

I would also like to point out that the billboard of the maid café in the background, though out of view on the cover, said, 'the recently popular soybean desserts made by maids are unlimited edition this week only♡'……

Perhaps Shingen mochi? It seems the soybean pastry culture in Tenguu City has touched the hearts of its people.

The publishing of this book has been a great success in every way owing to the combined efforts of many parties.

I'm very much grateful to Illustrator Tsunako-sensei for drawing such lovable illustrations in each publication. Inverse Tohka's casual clothes are so adorable. Editor-sama too, thank you for your hard work. To Designer Kusano-san, everyone in the editorial and the business department, logistic division and the retail sector, along with you holding this book right now, everybody who has contributed to this title, I'd like to extend my sincerest gratitude.

The next release will be in December——Date A Live - Encore 6.

Since the one who intrigues all has made an appearance in the epilogue, I hope the sixteenth volume may also be published soon. Hihihihihi.

With regard to her arrival, what path will Shidou take? Please wait and see.

Well then, I look forward to our next meeting.

August 2016, Tachibana Koushi.

Notes and References

Chapter 6 Notes

↑ 1: Pestilence describes Shidou's wish to, in a sense, conquer the Spirits. Of course, this wording may sound pejorative to the other Spirits; however, from Mukuro's point of view, she has zero intimacy with Shidou; therefore, she regards him as a pest.

↑ 2: To revie means to respond.

↑ 3: Trompe-l'œil is French for a technique which deceives the eyes.

↑ 4: Refers to the classical myth of Icarus and Daedalus. Icarus fell from the sky after the wax holding his man-made wings together melted from flying to close to the sun.

↑ 5: Blót (ブロート) was a Norse pagan sacrifice to the Norse gods, the spirits of the land, and maybe even someone's ancestors. The sacrifice often took the form of a sacramental meal or feast.

Chapter 7 Notes

↑ 1: Nushi-sama (主様) is how girls politely call guys in the Edo period. The closest English equivalent would be something like milord.

↑ 2: Kotodama or kototama (言霊 ?, lit. "word spirit/soul") refers to the Japanese belief that mystical powers dwell in words and names. English translations include "soul of language", "spirit of language "Really…… so noisy."

↑ 3: The three principles are based on the expectation paper (予想紙) used in Japanese gambling. 本命 is the favorite to win, 対抗 is the opposition that is

second likely, and 大穴 is the dark horse that causes an upset victory.

Chapter 8 Notes

↑ 1: Ane-sama is Japanese for older sister.

Chapter 9 Notes

↑ 1: The word ごしゅじんさま (Goshujin-sama) can be used in a similar way as the word "master" in English. For instance when a maid addresses the owner of a large mansion or a castle, she may refer to him/her as ごしゅじんさま.

Date A Live Volume 15 - Mukuro Family

Author: **Tachibana Koushi**

Illustrator: **Tsunako**

Translated by《**Za£kiel**》

Edited by **Vizard6991**